

ASCENDANCE OFA BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Vol.2

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**





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Cast of Characters

Summary of Part Four:

At the Royal Academy, Rozemyne has become both a problem child and a top-ranking student. She took ownership of the library's magic tools through a blessing, played ditter against a greater duchy, advised royalty on matters of romance, defeated a Darkness feybeast, and healed the Ehrenfest gathering spot, among so many other things. Meanwhile at the guidance of the Sovereign knight commander, who knows that Ferdinand is a seed of Adalgisa, the king orders Ferdinand to leave Ehrenfest and marry into another duchy. Now, Ferdinand must endure a new life in Ahrensbach.



Wilfried

Sylvester's son, Rozemyne's older brother, and a third-year.



Rozemyne

The protagonist. She grew a little and now looks about nine, but she's the same on the inside and will do anything to read books. A third-year.

Ehrenfest's Archducal Family



Sylvester

The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.



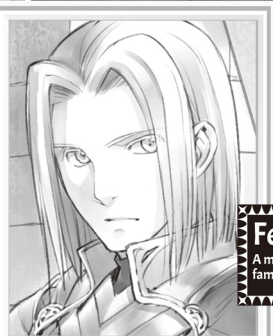
Florencia

Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.



Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, Rozemyne's little sister, and a second-year.



Melchior

Sylvester's son. Rozemyne's little brother.

Bonifatius

Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.

Ferdinand

A member of the Ehrenfest archducal family. Sent to Ahrensbach by royal decree.

**Rihyarda**

Head attendant. An archnoble who cared for Ferdinand, Sylvester, and Karstedt when they were kids.

**Lieseleta**

Angelica's little sister and a sixth-year apprentice medatendant.

**Brunhilde**

A fifth-year apprentice archattendant.

**Gretia**

A fourth-year apprentice medatendant. Gave her name.

**Muriella**

A fifth-year apprentice medscholar. Gave her name.

**Roderick**

A third-year apprentice medscholar. Gave his name.

**Philine**

A third-year apprentice layscholar.

**Leonore**

A sixth-year apprentice archknight.

**Matthias**

A fifth-year apprentice medknight. Gave his name.

**Laurenz**

A fourth-year apprentice medknight. Gave his name.

**Judithe**

A fourth-year apprentice medknight.

**Theodore**

A first-year apprentice medknight. Serves only in the Royal Academy.

Rozemyne's Retainers

Hirschur.....Ehrenfest's dormitory supervisor. Professor from the scholar course.

Isidore.....A sixth-year apprentice archscholar serving Wilfried.

Ignaz.....A fourth-year apprentice archscholar serving Wilfried.

Alexis.....A sixth-year apprentice archknight serving Wilfried.

Marianne.....A fourth-year apprentice archscholar serving Charlotte.

Natalie.....A fifth-year apprentice archattendant serving Charlotte.

Traugott.....A fifth-year apprentice archknight. Rozemyne's former retainer.

Hartmut

.....An archscholar and the new High Priest. Otilie's son.

Cornelius

.....Karstedt's son and an archknight.

Angelica

.....Lieseleta's older sister and a medknight.

Damuel

.....A layknight.

Otilie

.....Hartmut's mother and an archattendant.

Ehrenfest Dormitory

Students from Other Duchies

Clarissa.....A sixth-year apprentice archscholar from Dunkelfelger.
Rarstark.....A sixth-year apprentice archknight from Dunkelfelger.
Ortwin.....A third-year archduke candidate from Drewanchel.
Detlind.....A sixth-year archduke candidate from Ahrensbach.
 Georgine's daughter.
Martina.....A fifth-year apprentice archtendant from Ahrensbach.
Raimund.....A fourth-year apprentice medscholar from Ahrensbach.
 Hirschur's disciple.
Fairziere.....A fifth-year apprentice archtendant from Jossbrenner.
Lueuradi.....A third-year apprentice archscholar from Jossbrenner.
Lustlaune.....A third-year apprentice archtendant from Jossbrenner.
Murrenreue.....A fourth-year archduke candidate from Immerdink.



Lestilaut

A sixth-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.



Hannelore

A third-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.

Other Royal Academy Affiliates

Eglantine.....The second prince's first wife.
Rauffen.....Dunkelfelger's dormitory supervisor. Professor from the knight course.
Gundolf.....Drewanchel's dormitory supervisor. Professor from the scholar course.
Fraularm.....Ahrensbach's dormitory supervisor. Professor from the scholar course.
Hortensia.....An archlibrarian of the Royal Academy.
Solange.....A medlibrarian of the Royal Academy.
Schwartz.....A library magic tool.
Weiss.....A library magic tool.

Nobles from Other Duchies

Trauerqual.....The king. Carries the title of Zent.
Sigiswald.....The Sovereignty's first prince.
Anastasius.....The Sovereignty's second prince.
Hildebrand.....The Sovereignty's third prince.
Raublut.....The Sovereign knight commander.
Loyalitat.....The vice commander of the Sovereign Knight's Order.
Oswin.....Anastasius's head attendant.

Arthur.....Hildebrand's head attendant.
Cordula.....Hannelore's head attendant.
Adolphine.....A member of the Drewanchel archducal family.
Georgine.....Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.
Letizia.....An archduke candidate from Ahrensbach.
Sergius.....Ferdinand's attendant.

Ehrenfest's Nobility

Karstedt.....Ehrenfest's knight commander. Rozemyne's noble father.
Elvira.....Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.
Eckhart.....Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.
Justus.....Ferdinand's head attendant and scholar. Rihyarda's son.
Leberecht.....Florencia's scholar. Hartmut's father.

Other

Wilma.....In charge of the temple's orphanage. Artist.
Rosina.....Rozemyne's personal musician.

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Prologue

Many of Aub Ahrensbach's scholars were gathered together with Ferdinand, previously a resident of Ehrenfest and the fiancé of the next archduchess, in the office he had received in Ahrensbach's castle.

"This is data regarding the Adalgisa princess," one said. "An emissary from Lanzenave arrived in the summer and consulted us regarding her being sent over. The king will need to be informed of this during the next Archduke Conference."

"An Adalgisa princess..." Ferdinand muttered, unpleasant thoughts stirring within him. He recalled that Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander, had noticed his unique history as a former seed of Adalgisa. It was possible that others here knew the circumstances of his birth as well.

The scholars continued their explanation, unaware that Ferdinand was acting so guarded. "You may not know this, as you are from another duchy, but Adalgisa princesses come from Lanzenave. Please read these more detailed papers on how she will be received." Their duty was to bring Ferdinand up to speed with his responsibilities in Ahrensbach, and they carried in stacks of documents and paperwork one after another. Detlinde, as the next archduchess, needed to prioritize dyeing the foundational magic with her mana, so Ferdinand had to take on most of the administrative work.

I can understand why the scholars would rather work with me than Lady Detlinde—I am better accustomed to bureaucratic work—but my duties educating Lady Letizia are just as important.

Detlinde had not done anything even remotely close to paperwork until very recently, in part due to her being the youngest daughter of Georgine, who had previously been the duchy's third wife. In fact, Detlinde had previously been further from the seat of aub than any other archduke candidate, trailing behind the second wife's two sons; her brother, the third wife's son; and Letizia, the first wife's granddaughter from Drewanchel.

In the end, however, the purge had seen the second wife's two sons reduced to archnobles, Detlinde's older brother had perished in an unfortunate accident, and Aub Ahrensbach had died before Letizia came of age. Detlinde was thus having to serve as a temporary archduchess.

The scholars informed Ferdinand that the late archduke had not

done much to educate Detlinde, as he had not wanted her to stand above the younger Letizia.

Still, to think that I would be the one sending a Lanzenave princess to that villa...

Ferdinand started reading the provided documents. He felt a sharp, unmistakable bitterness knowing that he would need to be consistently involved with Lanzenave and Adalgisa, but he kept his true feelings from showing. His eyebrow did not so much as twitch.

“Oh, I thought it was rather cold today... It seems the snow has finally begun to fall,” one of the scholars remarked, their voice somewhat bright.

Ferdinand turned to look outside. Indeed, there were flecks of white falling from the sky. The scholars gathered at the window, suggesting that snow was rare in Ahrensbach, but this was a common sight at the start of every winter in Ehrenfest. He returned his attention to his documents.

“Our duchies share the same seasons, but winter here is very different from in Ehrenfest,” Justus mused aloud as he brought over some tea. Ferdinand understood this as Justus’s way of proposing that he take a break, so he put down his pen and accepted the cup.

Upon hearing Justus’s remark, Sergius, one of the Ahrensbach attendants assigned to Ferdinand, blinked a few times. “Different how?” he asked, his yellow eyes betraying his interest. The gathered scholars were looking at Justus as well, clearly eager to hear about the dissimilarities between their two duchies.

“In Ehrenfest, we see our first flurries at the end of autumn and the start of winter—around when we first came to Ahrensbach. By now, the streets will already be thick with snow, and the people will be taking shelter indoors at all times.”

“We spend our winters differently as well,” Eckhart added. “Socializing thrives at the castle, but knights need to focus on training and preparing for the Lord of Winter hunt. There is no Lord of Winter in Ahrensbach, which alone makes a considerable difference.”

Those listening made intrigued noises. As there was no Lord of Winter to hunt in Ahrensbach, the duchy’s knights did not put special effort into their training.

“The most significant difference might be in how we use our winter playroom,” Justus said. “I was surprised to see that Ahrensbach seldom uses its own outside of when students are being moved to the Royal Academy. In Ehrenfest, the adults tend to be busy over the winter, in part due to the Lord of Winter hunt, so the children too young to attend the Royal Academy spend all day in the winter playroom so as to stay out of their way.”

Those in Ahrensbach had no need to socialize intensely and gather

information before the snow grew unreasonably heavy. Adults in particular were afforded a lot more flexibility; nobles rarely spent all day in the castle, and children accompanied their guardians while socializing instead of spending that time in the winter playroom. Even the archduke candidate Letizia, whom Ferdinand was working to educate, had prioritized strengthening bonds with the others in her faction.

“I was also surprised to learn that winter socializing is only done in the afternoon here. In Ehrenfest, to make the most of the brief window we have to socialize, we come together and mingle from morning to night.”

Ahrensbach nobles came together in the afternoon, when it was warmer. During the winter, they tended to stay inside until fourth bell and start their day after lunch—unless they were invited to lunch, that was. In contrast, during the summer when the sun beat down mercilessly, nobles barely went outside between third and fifth bell.

To accommodate the usual Ahrensbach schedule, Ferdinand would spend his mornings doing handover work, then educate Letizia and do the socializing expected of the next archduchess’s fiancé in the afternoon.

“Still, this lifestyle offers much more leeway than I expected,” Ferdinand said. “I wish to use this opportunity to ask for your guidance.”

The late Aub Ahrensbach had already passed away by the time Ferdinand arrived at his new home, so Ferdinand was worried about a great many things. For now, however, it seemed that everything was proceeding smoothly. The ever-annoying Detlinde had returned to the Royal Academy shortly after his arrival, and Georgine was holed up in her villa, in mourning for her late husband, so he had not seen her at all during socializing. Furthermore, the scholars who had served the archduke were being surprisingly cooperative with the handover of work. For now, at least, they seemed to value and greatly respect Ferdinand as a hard worker and the fiancé of their next archduchess. It was a source of great relief... but also somewhat harrowing.

This could not be more different from what happened in Ehrenfest after Father ended up succumbing to his illness.

“Might we ask what you mean by ‘this opportunity’?”

“You are all scholars of Aub Ahrensbach, are you not?” Ferdinand said. “I assume you will work beneath Lady Detlinde when she returns from the Royal Academy and takes her place as the next archduchess.”

In other words, Ferdinand could only focus on handover work during the brief period when Detlinde was at the Royal Academy. Rather than prioritizing a groom from another duchy, their focus needed to be on educating Ahrensbach’s next archduchess.

The scholars exchanged glances, then all gave troubled, telling smiles. "Lady Detlinde is not nearly educated enough for us to work under her," one said. "By the time she catches up, I expect Lady Letizia will have come of age."

"We might have thought otherwise if she at least took the work seriously," added another, "but, oh, how she hates studying. Though she may only be a temporary archduchess, I would expect a bit more... well..."

Although there was some criticism of the next archduchess, it was immediately followed by more generous words of understanding.

"She is underage. Plus, as the third child of a third wife, she has not had the opportunity to receive a political education before now. It would be cruel of us to demand too much from her."

"Indeed, indeed. Not to mention, she will only be holding the position of aub for a short while, until Lady Letizia comes of age and marries Prince Hildebrand. We do not want her to become too attached. Is her lack of interest not ideal for us?"

She may not be interested in politicking, but she certainly has a lust for power...

Ferdinand dismissed the thought at once; naturally, he could not criticize the woman he was to marry by royal decree here in public. That said, his interactions with her during the few days between his arrival in Ahrensbach and her departure for the Royal Academy had been enough for him to confirm that she had a personality that was painful just to think about.

And so, Ferdinand merely nodded along with the scholars' remarks, striving to understand their thought processes and personalities as much as he could. It would be better not to speak; he was still pretending to dote on Detlinde, and offering his own thoughts would only result in him lambasting her with utter sincerity. The scholars were criticizing their next archduchess with slight grins, but she was one of their own; if someone from another duchy attempted to join in, then it was possible that they might take offense.

"We are in no position to start being soft on Lady Detlinde and treating her like a child. She may not have come of age yet, but she will very soon, so that serves as no excuse. She will also be participating in the next Archduke Conference as an aub."

"Even if she is only holding the position temporarily, being the aub is by no means easy. To be honest, I am truly grateful that you are here, Lord Ferdinand; I do not know what we would do without you."

"And let us not forget how Lady Georgine has abetted this. She did not resist being moved to her villa."

From there, the focus of the scholars' conversation quickly turned to Georgine. Ferdinand listened closely, comparing their words to

what he had learned through Justus.

“It was a surprise to all, especially after she filled chalices with mana to get Old Werkestock on her side. I thought she would cling more tightly to her newly obtained power.”

“As I understand it, Ehrenfest ceased offering its support...”

“Was that not just Ehrenfest shifting its support from Lady Georgine to Lord Ferdinand, though?” Justus remarked casually. “Aub Ehrenfest is closer to Lord Ferdinand than he is to Lady Georgine, after all.”

The scholars nodded, agreeing with his logic.

Ferdinand drew his brows together in the slightest frown; Georgine had more influence with Old Werkestock and the northern provinces bordering Ehrenfest than Sylvester and the others realized.

“Although we are both members of the same archducal family, Lady Georgine and I have hardly seen one another. I thought that we might socialize a bit more now that I am here, but I have not seen her since our initial greetings...”

Georgine’s lack of presence was almost disturbing considering that she was the late archduke’s first wife. She was also very familiar with Justus, meaning that not even his disguises could get him near her villa. Justus had even said that Georgine had once boasted about being able to see through his cross-dressing.

Ferdinand continued to listen to every word the scholars said about Georgine until there came a sudden knock on the door. “Excuse me,” said the messenger responsible. “This arrived from Raimund in the Royal Academy.”

Raimund was serving Ferdinand not just as his disciple, but as his retainer in Ahrensbach as well—although they were more like mentor and student than lord and retainer. He was lacking in mana and spent all his time in Hirschur’s laboratory, trying to make magic tools as efficient as possible.

Initially, Ferdinand had spoken to Raimund simply because Rozemyne had taken a liking to the young student. He had then accepted him as a disciple as a means of observing him while simultaneously gathering information on Ahrensbach. By this point, however, Ferdinand found reading his unique perspectives and answering his questions by letter a source of great comfort.

Sergius accepted the box from the messenger and then opened it. Inside was a sound-recording magic tool.

“Oho. Is that an improved version?” one scholar asked.

“Its feystone seems to be exposed...” another added.

“Ah, there is also a letter from Lady Rozemyne. We’ll read this first, if you do not mind.”

“I do not mind in the least,” Ferdinand replied, preparing himself

as the scholars took and started going through the letter. They were checking for anything dangerous while also looking for any hidden messages or the like that they would need to censor.

That fool. What has she written this time?

In her previous report, Rozemyne had described the state of Hirschur's laboratory, inadvertently informing the scholars that Ferdinand had been a burden on the professor during his time at the Royal Academy and that he had become so absorbed in his research that he had neglected to clean or eat properly. The scholars had laughed at Rozemyne telling Ferdinand not to live so unhealthily in Ahrensbach, which had made him want to tear up the letter on the spot. Unfortunately, the hidden report she had written in shining ink was much too important, so he had needed to refrain.

One scholar read through the letter while the others began checking for any patterns or phrasing that might have signified a code. Of course, nothing they did made the shining ink appear. Ferdinand checked Raimund's magic tool once it was given to him while listening to the contents of the letter be read aloud.

Ferdinand had tasked his disciple with making a smaller and more mana-efficient sound-recording magic tool. The first prototype had been small enough to rest on one's palm—an improvement over the standard model that required two hands—but Ferdinand had sent it back, saying that it could be made even smaller by taking away the lid. Now the lid was gone, exposing the feystone used to store the recording.

All in all, the magic tool was fairly well made.

“Upon starting our joint research project with Ahrensbach, Professor Hirschur told me that my strengths are my mana capacity and my brewing skills,” one of the scholars said, reading Rozemyne's letter aloud. “Thus, my role is to create prototypes based on the designs that Raimund comes up with.”

“Aah... I was wondering how he finished so quickly, but I see that Rozemyne is the reason.”

Raimund was short on mana even for a mednoble, so while he was quick to draw blueprints, his progress was slowed considerably when it came to creating the prototypes. This one had arrived much sooner than expected—evidently thanks to Rozemyne having brewed it. Raimund was helping to realize the things she wanted, so there was nothing wrong with her helping him during the creation process.

“The details are written in the report I sent through Professor Fraularm.’ Hm? Have you received a report about the joint research project from Ahrensbach's dormitory supervisor?”

“Not to my knowledge.” Ferdinand turned to the attendants behind him. “Sergius, Justus, have any retainers visited while I was

absent?"

"No, my lord," Sergius replied. "A report from a dormitory supervisor would not have been sent to your guest chambers in the first place, so there would never have been a risk of it arriving while you were absent for socializing or the like."

That was the obvious answer; any letter sent to Ferdinand would first need to be inspected by the relevant personnel in Ahrensbach. It was unthinkable that he could have received a report without the scholars here knowing.

"Hm. Then we will need to question the dormitory supervisor," a scholar said. "We do not want the joint research to be delayed, nor do we wish to trouble Ehrenfest."

"Understood."

After that section of the report, which had more or less called out Fraularm, came the topic of a tea party for bookworms hosted by the royal family. Rozemyne had eagerly gone along with the idea despite it meaning she would need to socialize with the very people she had continuously been told to avoid. One could easily imagine her restraint going straight out the window the moment books and libraries were put before her.

"Still, to think Lady Rozemyne was invited to such a tea party..." one scholar said with a sigh. "If only Lady Detlinde were to socialize with royalty a bit more."

Some bemoaned the fact that an Ahrensbach archduke candidate had not received an invitation but an archduke candidate from the lower-ranked Ehrenfest had, while others were more interested in the sweets that were described as having been served.

"So... Dunkelfelger produced new sweets with the recipe it obtained, hm?"

"We purchased the same recipe during the Archduke Conference, so perhaps we could try making something with our specialty fruit as well. Lord Ferdinand, would you happen to have an eye for what would suit pound cake?"

"Well... as mentioned in Rozemyne's letter, I have little interest in food," Ferdinand replied. "You would be much better off entrusting this question to a chef who is familiar with Ahrensbach fruits."

They were asking him to make new sweets, but Ferdinand had no motivation for that.

Rozemyne made new sweets and combined unique flavors because she had an unusual attachment to food—an attachment that Ferdinand did not share. He suddenly recalled that she had once said to him, "If you want to eat tasty food, then train your own chef." If she were here now, perhaps she would be adapting Ahrensbach's highly spicy dishes to suit her own tastes.

“I borrowed books from the Sovereignty and the palace library,” the scholar reading out Rozemyne’s letter continued. “The one that Professor Solange lent me was from a closed-stack archive and contains research about Schwartz and Weiss. I will inform you if we make any new discoveries.”

“I see. To think she would be allowed to borrow a book from a closed-stack archive...” another scholar muttered. “I suppose it should come as no surprise given that she is both a disciple of Lord Ferdinand and a regular visitor of the Hirschur Laboratory.”

The scholars continued to praise Rozemyne for a reason that Ferdinand would never have expected. According to their explanation, the valuable contents of the closed-stack archives were only lent to those whom the librarians considered particularly intelligent; everyone else would simply be told that it was too soon for them to read such things. Ferdinand had not known this, since his requests for such books had never been refused.

However, times have changed.

Now, there were drastically fewer librarians at the Royal Academy, and numerous magic tools in the library were no longer being supplied with mana. In its current state, the library was unable to perform the duties for which it had originally been constructed; the place was more akin to a glorified study station. There was a chance that the library would improve somewhat with the arrival of the new archlibrarian, but it would still be a far cry from its former glory. The scholars here likely did not know how dramatically things had changed—that, or they merely could not understand it.

“This time, I managed to endure the whole thing without collapsing. I’ve grown so much, wouldn’t you say? It’s all thanks to the potions you made for me, Ferdinand.’ And... that is the end of this letter.”

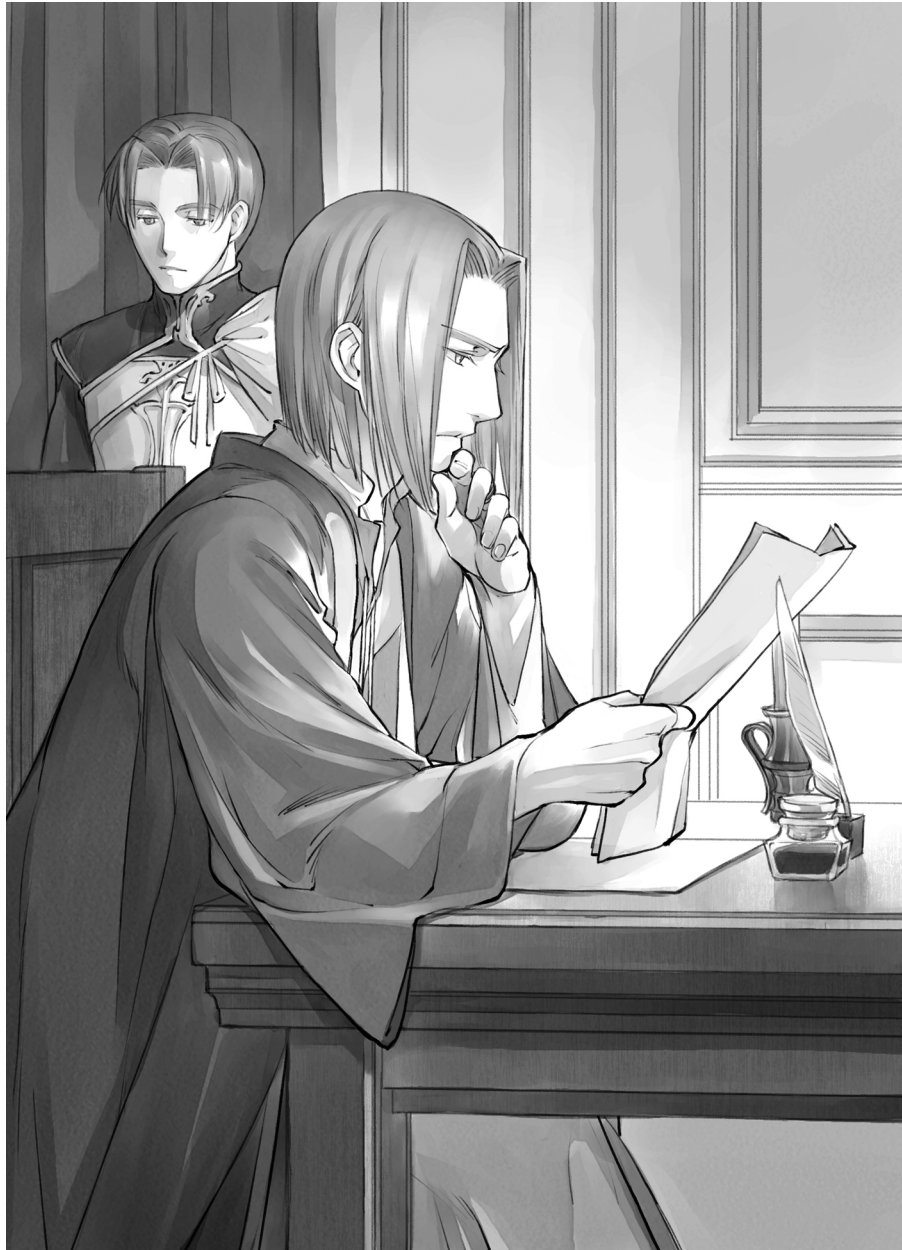
Having failed to find anything unusual, the scholar attempted to pass the letter to Ferdinand. However, Ferdinand waved away the correspondence and said, “I am short on time. There is nothing that I must urgently reread, and my reply can come later. Sergius, store the letter in my chambers with my letter from Raimund and the magic tool. For now, let us resume our duties. Justus, take this tea away.”

After announcing the end of their break, Ferdinand picked up a pen and returned to his paperwork.

That night, in his chambers, Ferdinand started on his response to Rozemyne. He had yet to read the hidden message that her letter doubtless contained—there were too many retainers nearby for that—so he focused solely on his public-facing reply. Only after seventh bell, when most of his retainers had gone, would Ferdinand take out the

shining ink. He would wait until Eckhart was on night watch, but even then his time would be limited; the knight was particularly concerned about his lord's well-being and would swiftly call on him.

Ferdinand skimmed the letter and then put his head in his hands.
How does she keep getting involved with royalty like this?



First, Eglantine and Prince Anastasius had deduced that Rozemyne had been the one to bless them during their graduation—and to avoid further unrest, they had asked her to serve as the High Bishop and bless Prince Sigiswald for his Starbind Ceremony. The request had not come at unreasonably short notice, and there were various factions involved, so neither Rozemyne nor Ehrenfest were in any position to refuse.

At the same time, however, the Sovereign temple was involved, and the ceremony being held during the Archduke Conference would draw the attention of every aub from every duchy, alongside that of various other key nobles. Not to mention, Rozemyne had personally confessed that one of her reasons for accepting was so that she could be present when Ferdinand and Detlinde had their own Starbinding.

Please, stop. You will only end up blessing me more than you do the prince.

Ferdinand was certain of that outcome. Rozemyne had already said that he was like family to her, and it was simple to predict what trouble an emotion-driven blessing would create. Some of those who had seen Eglantine receive her blessing had started to argue that she should take the throne, so imagine this scenario: Ferdinand, after being accused of vying for the throne as a seed of Adalgisa and moving to Ahrensbach to indicate his loyalty, receives more blessings from the gods than anyone else. It was not a pleasant thought, by any means.

At the very least, she will want Hartmut with her...

Hartmut had the sharpest eyes and the keenest mind out of all Rozemyne's retainers. With his assistance as the High Priest, Rozemyne would presumably find things much easier to deal with.

Next, there was the matter of the triple-locked archive's keys. Ferdinand had given Rozemyne free rein with her Library Committee business under the assumption that her work would consist only of regularly visiting the library and supplying its magic tools with mana. Having her take ownership of one of the keys was far from good.

After all, that underground archive contains so much information leading to the Grutrisheit.

Ferdinand rubbed his temples, recalling the text and the magic circle that had arisen from the High Bishop's bible. He had never been the High Bishop himself, so it had not even occurred to him that such a development might occur. Rozemyne was surely closer to the Grutrisheit than anyone in the royal family, and if she were to enter the underground archive, then Ferdinand was quite confident that her book-oriented curiosity would result in her obtaining it.

But how can I prevent her from going near the archive?

As he pondered this, his eyes fell on one line in particular: "Once the librarian has inspected the inside, I'm allowed to read whatever books it contains." He frowned. There were severe restrictions on who could enter that archive. It was managed almost entirely by magic tools, with the librarians merely safeguarding the keys.

It would not be strange for Professor Solange and the new librarian to be unfamiliar with this rule, as the former has never been able to go inside. But how is the royal family still in the dark? They should be visiting the archive more than anyone.

Ferdinand had thought that maybe the royal family was deliberately keeping this knowledge to themselves due to the purge, but in reality, they had simply lost the knowledge altogether. The royal family only had themselves to blame, but not even that explained the extent of their ignorance on the subject. It seemed more likely that someone in the royal palace was restricting the flow of information or concealing documents.

But should I say that?

Ferdinand was in Ahrensbach precisely because he was suspected of wanting the Grutrissheit; he did not want to invite any more suspicion, nor did he want to get involved with royalty. Unfortunately, that no longer mattered. Rozemyne had gotten involved with the royal family and the underground archive against his will; if anyone came to realize that he was hiding information, then he would only be placed under further scrutiny.

"Although I may not have the Grutrissheit, it is the Zent's duty to maintain peace, no matter how ephemeral it so often proves to be," the king had said at their meeting.

Ferdinand was a seed of Adalgisa, and Ehrenfest had not assisted the king during the civil war. These two facts alone had aroused suspicion that they were seeking to claim the throne, and Trauerqual expressed that he could not ignore the risk of Yurgenschmidt once again being ravaged by war. Ferdinand could not fault the man for his decision—after all, it was the same conclusion any good king would make.

By indirectly informing the royal family of what awaits them in the underground archive, I should be able to keep Rozemyne away from it.

He could send information about the underground archive to Rozemyne, which would reveal to the royal family that she was providing him with intelligence—and as Rozemyne was an archduke candidate of a duchy already suspected of treason, the royal family would immediately start treating her with more caution. She would be forbidden from entering the library and most likely removed from her position as owner of one of the three keys. They had gone as far as to send Ferdinand to Ahrensbach, so they would absolutely refuse to let

Rozemyne anywhere near the archive.

And that is what matters.

To Ferdinand, keeping Rozemyne away from the underground archive was more important than anything else. That was why he was even willing to exploit the royal family to make it happen. The words and the magic circle that had arisen from the High Bishop's bible—one look at them was all anyone would need to conclude that Rozemyne was unconsciously drawing closer to the Grutrissheit.

I do not know how much she will be able to resist when put before a document-filled archive, but I will emphasize my warning nonetheless.

“If the royal family does not already know about this, then they must be made aware. You are not to approach the archive yourself, however. That will only cause problems.”

After finishing his response, Ferdinand let out a heavy sigh.

Just... let this strange cooperation end there. Please.

He was asking both Rozemyne and the royal family.

The Royal Family and the Library

As I was waiting for the royal family to summon me again, I decided to be proactive. First, I created a questionnaire for the Dunkelfelger apprentice knights helping with our joint research. My scholars made all the necessary copies and prepared the answer sheets for me, and through this process they learned the general format of a questionnaire and how to make their own.

Moving on, I purchased the schematics of the improved magic tool from Raimund, since it had received a passing grade from Ferdinand. I could use these to make one of my own. The tool itself was compact enough to be held in a single hand, and while the standard version played its recording when the lid was opened, this one simply required the recipient to touch the exposed feystone. Not to mention, it could record several messages instead of just one.

“However, the more messages you want to record, the stronger a feystone of Wind, Earth, and Life you will need,” Raimund noted.

“That won’t be a problem.”

The earth at Ehrenfest’s gathering spot was rich with mana, perhaps because of how frequently I was regenerating it. Plus, according to the apprentice knights’ reports, the increased quality of our ingredients meant that the feybeasts coming for them were growing stronger as well. At the moment, the knights were hunting there daily as training for their upcoming dinner game against Dunkelfelger, forced upon us by our joint research project. I needed only to buy the feystones I required from them.

“Ngh... I wish *I* could buy feystones that easily...” Raimund groaned.

“You will be able to soon. If others want the magic tool detailed in these schematics, then I will pay you an information fee.”

Raimund received my explanation of royalties with a look of absolute confusion. “Huh? But you’ve already bought the schematics, Lady Rozemyne. What’s all this about?”

“Schematics such as these that are bound to see such wide and extensive use are worth the extra cost, are they not? If we do not foster good relationships with our researchers and compensate them well, then I do not believe they will stay motivated.”

“Your idea is very wonderful indeed, Lady Rozemyne,” Raimund said, his eyes sparkling. Hirschur looked just as amazed. It seemed

that they were only used to one-and-done sales.

I promptly started making my own sound-recording magic tool, listening carefully to Raimund as he talked me through the process. After dumping in some feystones, I was finally done.

“Could we perhaps put this in a stuffed toy that speaks when one touches the head or stomach?” I asked.

“If you keep the feystone exposed, yes, but what would be the point of that?” Raimund replied, tilting his head at me. Beside him, Lieseleta leaned forward, her deep-green eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

“A stuffed toy that would speak upon being stroked would be wonderfully cute, would it not?” she said. “Just imagine it.”

“I know, right?” I replied. “Thus, in keeping with my tradition, I shall make it a red pan—”

“It has to be a shumil, yes. That will certainly be the cutest,” Lieseleta interjected, giddy with excitement. She then fixed me with an unyielding stare. “Do allow me to assist with making the stuffed toy.”

Unfortunately, I was far from being a talented seamstress, so I swallowed my suggestion that we should make the stuffed toy a red panda and went with a shumil instead.

Red pandas are cute, but there's no helping this. It's hard to make things like that on your own.

Days passed, and we soon reached the date of our meeting with royalty. This was a summons rather than a tea party, so I only had to prepare enough sweets to present as a gift. Our load was light, but my heart was heavy.

“I did not think I would end up returning to their villa so soon...” I said.

Brunhilde gave a troubled smile. “You are the one who decided to inform them of what could have been kept private, Lady Rozemyne.”

“There was a report of Aub Ehrenfest agonizing over this as well,” Rihyarda added, looking equally strained. “However, if this information will aid the royal family even the slightest amount, then it would not be wise to keep it from them. Milady, I am of the opinion that your decision was just and ideal.”

My retainers had heard of the royal family's struggles from Anastasius before the tea party for bookworms. They were very sympathetic to the current king, who was running himself ragged trying to supply mana to the foundation despite having never been raised or educated for his position. Apparently, they saw his situation as similar to my own, comparing his ordeal to my grueling work supplying mana to Ehrenfest as the archduke's adopted daughter and

the High Bishop despite having been raised in the temple and not receiving a noble's education.

Though I doubt I'm struggling even half as much as King Trauerqual.

Unlike the royal family, who didn't know what to do after losing such crucial information, I was receiving the expert guidance of so many people. I was truly blessed to have them.

"This may be a summons from royalty, but at least it's with Prince Anastasius," I said. He had graciously forgiven me for all my previous blunders, whether it was reading too deeply into his intentions with Eglantine or collapsing in his presence. Knowing that he wouldn't suspect me of treason or planned usurpation when I told him what I knew made this a lot more comforting than if another member of the royal family had summoned me.

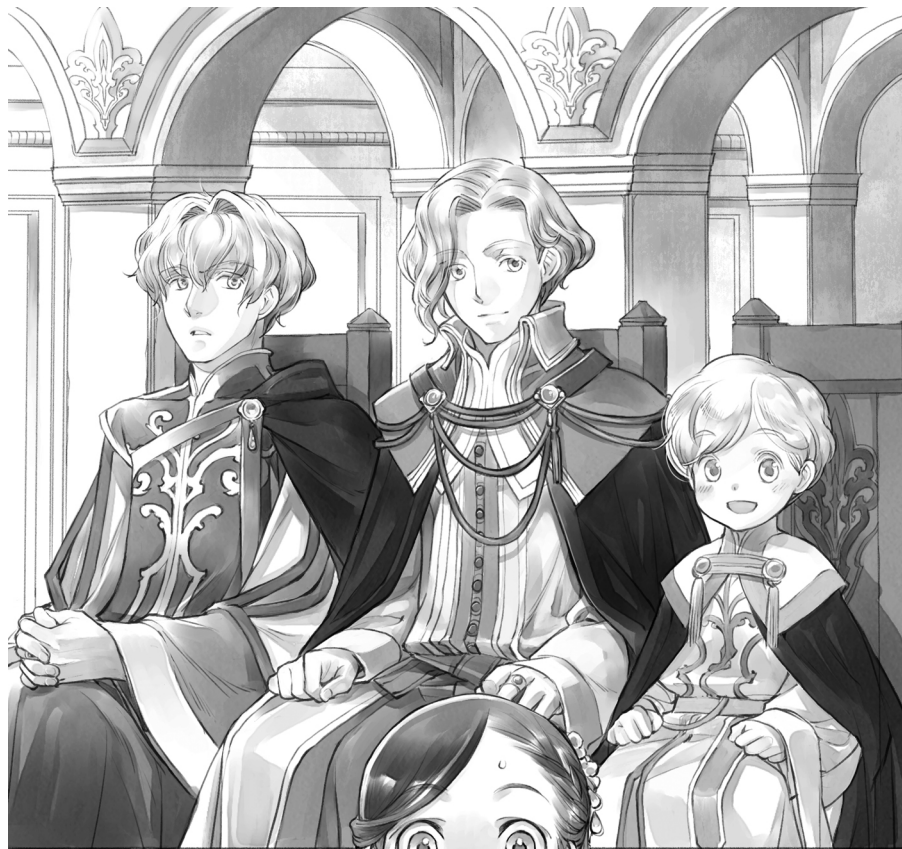
"Do not let your guard down, milady," Rihyarda chided just as we arrived outside the door to the villa. Oswin was there to welcome us inside.

"We have been waiting, Lady Rozemyne of Ehrenfest."

We were taken to a room where three people were sitting in wait. Among them were Hildebrand, who met me with a smile, and Anastasius, who quietly muttered, "She's here."

Between them was someone I didn't recognize: a man with light-golden hair like Anastasius, and deep-green eyes complementing a peaceful smile. The clothes he was wearing and his position between the two princes immediately told me who he was.

AIEEEEEEE! It's the first prince! Come on, Prince Anastasius! You should have warned me that he was going to be here!



I definitely hadn't expected Sigiswald to be present. I shouted complaints on the inside, but this was a summons, not a tea party; there was no reason why Anastasius would have informed me who was participating.

I smiled and greeted both Anastasius and Hildebrand, resisting the urge to crumble to the ground in despair, then knelt before Sigiswald and lowered my head. "It is an honor to meet you, Prince Sigiswald. May I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?"

"You may."

"I am Rozemyne, an archduke candidate of Ehrenfest. May the threads joining us never be broken."

I granted Sigiswald a blessing, taking care not to go too far, then acquired his permission to stand. Even though he was seated, I still had to look up to meet his gaze. He seemed to be a very calm, serene individual—a complete contrast to Anastasius. There was a diligent air to him, and I could tell that he was the kind of person who paid attention to matters both big *and* small, making him feel very much like a well-raised first son. He hardly came across as someone who would have fought Anastasius over Eglantine for the throne. Maybe it had just been their retainers doing the fighting.

Sigiswald looked me in the eye, maintaining his pleasant smile. "So you are this Rozemyne I have heard so much about. The Saint of Ehrenfest, wise enough to have come first-in-class two years in a row, but of such poor health that you missed the awards ceremony on both occasions... I have long wanted to meet you."

"I was looking forward to both ceremonies and deeply regret that I was unable to attend them. Many have described it to me as an honorable occasion where one receives direct praise from the king." I was trying to make it clear that my absence hadn't been deliberate, and I adopted Angelica's signature look of disappointment in an attempt to really sell it. No way could I admit that I had skipped my first ceremony after Ferdinand baited me with reading time.

"If you do not mind, I would like you to take a seat and tell us what you know about the library's archive," Sigiswald said. "We of the royal family truly do require even the faintest of slivers of information you may have."

I glanced at Anastasius and Hildebrand. They were both looking my way with interest, but Sigiswald was watching me a lot more closely. He maintained a peaceful smile, but I could feel the quiet intensity of his gaze.

"Answer our questions honestly," the first prince continued. "The archive locked by three keys can only be entered by members of the

royal family, a selection of archduke candidates, and the library's magic tools. Furthermore, it contains documents that we of the royal family need to read. Is this correct?"

"I cannot say for certain," I replied, speaking honestly. No sooner had the words left my lips than I noticed Anastasius plant a palm on his forehead.

"Rozemyne, whatever do you mean by that?" Sigiswald asked, blinking at me.

"I informed Ehrenfest of my taking ownership of one of the archive's keys and reported my delight at having the opportunity to read any documents confirmed safe for me to view. But the response I received was that this made no sense. I do not know much else, so I cannot verify anything without actually entering the archive."

"I see."

Anastasius sighed and said, "You remain too honest for your own good." Evidently, I should have sugarcoated my response a little better.

But, I mean... they literally told me to be honest.

"Still, this is rather strange," Sigiswald said.

"What do you mean?"

"Why is Ehrenfest the only duchy that knows of this archive requiring three keys? Not even the greater duchies or the Sovereignty itself were aware of it."

I couldn't help but cock my head at him. Surely there was *someone* who knew. A member of the royal family who had survived the purge, for example.

"Did the last professor who was teaching the archduke candidate course not know?" I asked.

"Her husband seems to have visited the library at a young age, but no, she did not. We consulted Aubs Klassenberg and Dunkelfelger as well, but neither has ever stepped foot in the Royal Academy's library."

I already knew why archduke candidates didn't go to the library—they would need to bring their train of retainers and would end up monopolizing the carrels, which would inconvenience everyone else. In general, the Royal Academy's library was considered a place for laynobles and mednobles, where they could study books they could not afford to buy or make money by transcribing them. It was for these reasons that my retainers often advised me against going to the library, but I truly loved reading there, so I had no intention of stopping. I was only avoiding it this year because I was busy with all of our research, and the handover process for Schwartz and Weiss was progressing slowly.

"Normal archduke candidates have their apprentice scholars fetch

whatever books or documents they want, so they have few reasons to visit the library themselves—or so I am told. Perhaps that is to blame.”

“Are the archduke candidates of your duchy told to visit the library personally?” Sigiswald asked, sounding ever so slightly amused.

Realizing that I had just insinuated that Ehrenfest archduke candidates were abnormal, I averted my eyes. “I go there readily because of how much I adore libraries and books. My siblings, Wilfried and Charlotte, rarely ever go themselves.”

“She’s telling the truth,” Hildebrand said. “Rozemyne just loves books, that’s all. And she was going to the library so often to supply Schwartz and Weiss with mana.” His explanation didn’t seem to stop Sigiswald from viewing me as a weird archduke candidate, but I was grateful that he had tried and gave him an appreciative nod.

“There is an Ehrenfest professor who has dedicated her life to research, and one of her past disciples was an archduke candidate whom she often sent to the library on her behalf,” I explained. “It did not help that this particular archduke candidate had few retainers whom he could trust and therefore could not risk letting anyone else handle the books he needed.”

The three princes all responded with exceedingly uncomfortable expressions; maybe I had said too much.

“As far as I am aware, it was a simple coincidence that he learned of this archive,” I continued. “He muttered something about wanting certain documents, so Schwartz and Weiss took him there to read them. The archlibrarians unlocked the archive for him without any fuss, so perhaps it was not a particularly secretive location at the time.”

We had no way to confirm this—the archlibrarians from back then were no longer with us—but if the archive really had been a royal secret, then surely Ferdinand would not have been allowed inside.

“I visited the Royal Academy’s library often and regularly interacted with Schwartz and Weiss as their master, but I was still unaware of the archive,” I said. “He must have been seeking very specialized documents.”

I had asked Schwartz and Weiss for books that I hadn’t read before but not for any specific kinds of documents. Thus, the books in the reading room were always enough to satisfy me.

“It is possible that Schwartz and Weiss would take me there after I exhaust every book in the reading room and then in the closed-stack archive that anyone can borrow from,” I noted. “But considering how little time remains before my graduation, I cannot see myself ever accomplishing that.”

I had deliberately refrained from saying who had given me all this information, but, as expected, Sigiswald and Anastasius had still deduced his identity.

Sigiswald continued to smile, but there was now a glint in his dark-green eyes. “Why did this individual keep such vital information to himself for so long?”

“He did not know that the royal family was unaware of this archive. Upon learning this, he told me to tell you, which is why I sent that ordonnanz. In fact, he also said that the royal family’s lack of knowledge on these subjects is so unnatural that he suspects someone has deliberately been hiding things from you.”

Ferdinand naturally understood that what I was saying would make me seem suspicious, but the information was important enough that he had determined it best for me to proceed anyway. In my opinion, it would be far more constructive if we dropped this conversation entirely and they went to the library to do some research themselves.

“There is something I wish to ask of the royal family,” I said. “May I?”

“Hold on,” Anastasius said, trying to stop me, but before he could protest any further—

“Go ahead,” Sigiswald interjected, nodding at me.

I smiled at him and then said, “You went out of your way to summon me here today, but what exactly do you hope to learn? Is it who told me this information? Or the contents of the documents that he said the royal family should know, perhaps? As I have not entered the archive myself, I will not be at all useful regarding the latter.”

A stir ran through our retainers. Anastasius said, “You speak above your place” while Sigiswald merely stared at me. Regardless, this discussion was clearly a waste of time.

“The diary of a past librarian that Solange allowed me to borrow said that members of the royal family visited the library upon coming of age and that all the archlibrarians gathered to welcome them. It seems plain to see that going to the library was once an important process for the royal family. That said, the Sovereign knight commander confiscated that diary some time ago, so I would assume you have all read it and already understand the importance of the archive.”

In essence, I was trying to say: “If you have the time to ask me where I got my information from, then you might as well just go to the library yourselves.” This message seemed to have been heard loud and clear, as Sigiswald exchanged a look with Anastasius, then nodded.

“If all of the archlibrarians gathered to welcome them, then it

really is likely that they were going to the archive of which we speak. If we go ourselves, then we will know whether the information within truly is valuable. Anastasius.”

“Right. I shall summon the Dunkelfelger archduke candidate to the library,” Anastasius said. He instructed Oswin to send an ordonnanz to Hannelore, but I quickly called out before Oswin could.

“Oswin, please ask Lady Hannelore to bring rejuvenation potions.”

“Rejuvenation potions?” he repeated.

I nodded. “I am told that registering with the keys requires a significant amount of mana. Better safe than sorry, no?”

“I do recall Hortensia saying something along those lines,” Anastasius said. “Oswin, do as she suggests.”

Oswin sent the ordonnanz, and a response from Hannelore came soon after: “Understood. I will make my way to the library now.” She was informed that the princes were going to be present, then we began our trek to meet her.

We stood out so, so much on our way to the library that I wanted to flee, but as the soon-to-be owner of a special key, that was hardly an option. Thankfully, we weren’t all walking together for long; the adult princes quickly marched ahead, moving much faster than my short legs would allow. I gave a relieved sigh as they gradually got farther away, and it was then that Hildebrand called out to me. Unlike his half-brothers, he was deliberately matching my pace.

“Do you know what’s in the archive, Rozemyne?” he asked.

“I am told that it contains documents about the archduke candidate course and old rituals, including one particular ritual that Ehrenfest was investigating. Our aub visited the library during the Archduke Conference, intending to see them, but Schwartz and Weiss said that he could not enter due to nobody having the keys.” I was hoping to make the royal family understand the importance of the library and perhaps even convince them to send over a few more archlibrarians.

Hildebrand clapped his hands together and smiled, looking as though he had just come up with a brilliant idea. “In that case, we can use this opportunity to look through the documents together.”

“Th-That is a very attractive offer, but my guardian has forbidden me from entering the archive so that I do not cause any further problems.” I didn’t want to make Ehrenfest seem any more suspicious, and avoiding the archive entirely was the best way to prevent any blessing explosions from occurring when I entered.

I understand that from a rational perspective, but... I'm still dying to go inside!

The desire was so strong. I wanted to read everything in there. Rihyarda likely wouldn’t let me, though, and Ferdinand would be mad

beyond words.

When we arrived at the library, Schwartz and Weiss came over and greeted us.

“Rozemyne here.”

“Hildebrand too.”

To my knowledge, this was the first time they had called me by my name. It wasn't unexpected, but it did feel very strange. To be honest, I was a little upset that I wasn't their “milady” anymore.

“Thank you for coming. We have already cleared the library,” Hortensia said. Naturally, she and Solange had been informed that we were coming. I silently extended my sympathies to all the students who had been dragged away from their studies, but that was far better than them being dragged into any trouble with the royal family.

While we were exchanging greetings with the librarians, Hannelore arrived. Her red eyes widened in shock when she saw not just one but three princes.

As if getting summoned by Prince Anastasius wasn't bad enough... I know how you feel, Hannelore; I really do. I was surprised too.

Hannelore went on to exchange first-time greetings with Sigiswald, after which he said, “I apologize for the abrupt summons, but I must ask that you assist us as a member of the Library Committee.”

“I will gladly provide as much assistance as is required,” she replied with a smile, not faltering even in the face of such a sudden request from a member of the royal family.

As expected of an archduke candidate from a greater duchy. I could learn a lot from her.

“The keys are in this office,” Hortensia said as she guided us there. “However, there is not enough room for everyone to enter. We must ask that you each bring only two guard knights and one scholar.”

We had three princes and two archduke candidates in our group; it made sense that we wouldn't be able to bring all of our retainers into the office. I chose Leonore, my archknight; Laurenz, since he was the best close-quarters fighter out of all the guard knights with me; and Philine, who was most accustomed to scholar work.

“These are the keys to the underground archive,” Hortensia said once we were inside, setting each one on the table with a loud clatter. She had found them in the archlibrarians' rooms in the library dormitory, and they needed to be registered with different people. “Lady Rozemyne, Lady Hannelore, please take a key each and start channeling mana into them.”

Hannelore and I did as instructed, gripping the keys and registering our mana with them. It wasn't unlike registering my mana to the key for the bible, so I finished in no time at all.

“That was rather quick,” Hortensia remarked, staring at me in surprise.

I smiled and said, “Why, thank you.” Hannelore similarly finished channeling mana into her key a few moments later.

“Once again, I am reminded of the gap between archduke candidates and archnobles...”

“Hortensia, they are both superb archduke candidates. You must not compare yourself to them,” Solange interjected, trying to console her. She then took out two keys from a storage box and explained that they were for opening the closed-stack archive and the door located within. “I never thought the day would come when I would welcome the royal family and use these keys...”

According to Solange, the archlibrarians had handled everything whenever the royal family came to the library. She had stayed in the shadows, directing attendants to make tea, prepare meals, and carry out other tasks of that nature.

With the keys in hand, we made our way to the reading room, where we reunited with our retainers who had been waiting outside. We then cut through the first floor of the library, our numbers having swelled in size once again.

“The book I lent Lady Rozemyne during our tea party for bookworms came from this very closed-stack archive,” Solange said with a nostalgic smile while opening a door at the very back of the reading room. This was going to be my first time going inside, and my heart raced at the very thought. The slightly dusty air mixed with the scent of parchment was heavenly.

Once everyone was in the not-so-large archive, Solange opened another door farther into the room. Lights instantly turned on behind it, and a staircase descending down into the basement came into view. It seemed rather bright, maybe because everything was white.

“Schwartz. Weiss. Please guide everyone,” Solange said.

“Guide everyone.”

“Important work.”

Schwartz and Weiss began to hop down the stairs.

“Hortensia, please enter next. As a mednoble, I can go no farther. Direct any further questions you may have to Schwartz and Weiss.”

Hortensia descended the stairs as requested, and the princes followed after her. Just like Solange, some of our retainers were also unable to continue onward. Several of the princes’ mednoble retainers similarly ended up hitting an invisible barrier that blocked their path.

“Those of you who cannot descend, await our return in the reading room,” Sigiswald instructed.

Once the three princes and their retainers were on their way down, Hannelore followed. I was last, as per the duchy rankings, and

not all of my retainers were able to come with me—Philine and Roderick were blocked, for instance. By the time we reached the stairs, only Rihyarda, Leonore, and Brunhilde remained; I had considerably fewer archnoble retainers than Hannelore and the royal family.

“You certainly have many mednobles in your retinue, Lady Rozemyne,” Hannelore said, turning to look at me as we continued down the stairs.

“I have two siblings already attending the Royal Academy, and a younger brother who is soon to join us. We are having to battle for retainers at the moment.”

“I suppose that is common for duchies with so many archduke candidates present at once.”

“Indeed. It has not been a problem for the most part, but I see now that there are times when only archnobles can accompany me,” I said, making a troubled expression. “This is all very new...”

Hannelore smiled and noted that this was her first time experiencing it as well.

We descended the faintly illuminated, pure-white stairway until we arrived at an equally pure-white reception hall, large enough that it could have accommodated all of our retainers at once. The interior was furnished with several tables and chairs, as though we were about to have a tea party, but the walls were bare, and there were no carpets or other such decorations that one would expect to see in a duchy’s tea party room. The floor was simply white.

I looked around the pure-white space and noticed that one wall was actually a more metallic color. On it were three equidistant protrusions, each decorated ornately as if to emphasize its presence.

“Three, line up.”

“Open lock.”

Schwartz and Weiss patted the metallic wall and pointed at the decorated protrusions; it seemed that the wall was actually the door to the archive, and the decorative protrusions were the keyholes. A closer look revealed that, rather than inserting the bit of the key as with a standard door, the entire key needed to be pushed into a mold.

I exchanged nods with Hortensia and Hannelore, then we pushed our keys into their respective slots.

“Hold the keys,” Schwartz said.

We did as instructed, making sure our keys didn’t fall out. As soon as all three were in place, there was a clicking sound, and the feystones with which we had registered began sucking out our mana. They flashed, then red veins started running across the wall.

“Get away,” Weiss said.

I slowly retreated until I could see the entire wall. It was covered

in magic circles with complex patterns. Once the magic circles were complete, the wall split into three sections which began to turn with a loud creaking sound. These “doors” slowly moved one hundred eighty degrees—and once they seemed to connect again, they disappeared.

Behind them was a place that did indeed look like an archive. There were book stands, writing desks, and many bookcases. One would expect the shelves to be packed with wooden boards, but they were instead lined with white slates. There were only twenty volumes of what appeared to be books resting on the desks.

As everyone stared ahead in surprise, Schwartz said, “Opened” and went inside.

Hortensia tried to follow, but she was halted by an invisible force just like the one at the stairway. “I cannot go inside after all...” she said, stopping in place and pushing against the barrier.

Weiss looked up at her and plainly said, “Milady not qualified.”

“I wish to see if archduke candidates can enter,” Anastasius said. “Rozemyne, go inside.”

“It pains me to say this, but my guardians forbade me from going into the archive,” I replied, holding back the urge to cry. “If you find anything that I am allowed to read, then please bring it out here for me.”

Weiss shook his head. “No lending here.”

“Whaaat?! That can’t be...”

I thought I would get to read at my leisure! So mean!

I was not the only one horrified to hear that the books couldn’t be lent out; Hortensia was practically trembling with a hand over her mouth in shock.

At this moment, Professor Hortensia and I are one.

Upon seeing Hortensia and me slump our shoulders, Anastasius gave an exasperated sigh and turned to the other archduke candidate present. “Very well, then. Hannelore, go inside.”

“Understood,” Hannelore replied, albeit after a short pause. She took a deep breath, steeled her resolve, and slowly walked forward with a hand gingerly extended.

She entered the archive without incident.

Schwartz said something to Hannelore once she was inside, and I could see her tilt her head in response. The barrier must have also blocked sound, as we couldn’t actually hear them.

“It seems archduke candidates can enter after all,” Anastasius mused. “Well then, Brother... I will go in first.”

After checking for danger, Anastasius turned back to the entrance and nodded. Sigiswald joined him not long after, but their retainers collectively failed to enter.

“Me next, then,” Hildebrand said with a bright smile, moving to

follow them. But as he tried to step forward, an invisible force stopped him. He inhaled sharply and started pounding on the barrier. "Why won't it let me through?! Why only me?! Is it because I'm engaged to an Ahrensbach archduke candidate and won't be royalty forever?!" he cried, on the verge of tears.

Weiss shook his head. "No, Hildebrand. Not enough mana."

Hildebrand wasn't the only one to harden in response to this news; his present retainers exchanged glances, unsure of what to say to him.

I made my way over to the youngest prince. Sure, Weiss had said that he didn't have enough mana to enter the archive, but that was nothing to be upset about. "It is written that those of the royal family who came to this archive did so after coming of age. There is no helping that you would not have enough mana when you have not even entered the Royal Academy. You have not learned to compress your mana, you have not been granted the divine protections of the gods, and you have not even obtained your schtappe."

"Rozemyne..."

"You have yet to finish your growth period, that is all. Now, why not wait with me?" I gestured to the chairs around one of the tables.

Hildebrand scanned the room, looking at the tables and chairs before the invisible wall. "You're going to be waiting here, Rozemyne?"

"As much as I would enjoy entering the archive, Aub Ehrenfest has forbidden me from doing so... Still, we can see inside from here, can we not? I imagine this is where retainers would normally observe their lord or lady to ensure they are not in danger. I intend to have some tea and wait to hear whether any important documents truly are located inside."

"I will join you, then," Hildebrand said contently, making his way over to one of the chairs. His head attendant, Arthur, sighed in relief, then gave me an appreciative smile.

"Brunhilde, please consult Professor Solange about preparing tea," I said.

"Understood," she replied, then gracefully turned on her heel and started up the stairs. Upon seeing this, the other retainers started making preparations of their own.

"Prince Hildebrand, I similarly wish to prepare tea for you," Arthur said. "May I?"

"Please do."

Brunhilde returned with only a portion of what she needed for my tea. "I returned to the dormitory with Lieseleta, but this is all that I can carry on my own," she said with a troubled smile.

“In that case, take a moment to breathe,” Rihyarda said, then went back upstairs to fetch the rest.

I nodded in agreement. “You may rest over there once the tea has been poured.”

“Oh, no, Lady Rozemyne; I mustn’t let you out of my sight. You might charge toward the archive at any moment,” Brunhilde giggled.

Leonore noted that she shared this concern. Apparently, they couldn’t trust me when I was watching the archive so closely and practically buzzing with anticipation.

But, I mean, there’s an archive filled with books and documents I’ve never seen before literally RIGHT there! Of course I’m going to fidget! Basically anyone in my position would have a hard time keeping still.

Since the door could only be opened with all three keys, it was impossible to say when another opportunity like this would arise, if at all. Of course I was struggling to hold in my urge to read.

Hildebrand sipped his tea, sighed, and then looked at his hands. “What can I do to raise my mana capacity?” he muttered, pursing his lips.

“Mana compression isn’t taught until the Royal Academy, so there is no need for you to fret about this now,” I said. “Your capacity will swell once you find a technique that suits you. Plus, the royal family must have an effective method researched by generations of kings, surely.”

It was apparently normal for mana compression methods to be treated as secrets kept to oneself or one’s house. I was sure that the royal family had their own. It also seemed wise for me to avoid giving Hildebrand any tips, as I could guess that he would rush to try any method that I told him about. For that reason, I settled on a vague reply and turned my attention back to the archive.

Hannelore and the others must have been trying to get a general idea of everything in the archive; they had split up and were taking out the white, slate-looking documents, skimming them, then putting them back where they had found them. Hannelore shook her head, and the two princes were frowning. Then, Anastasius looked at a big open book on a stand and called Sigiswald over.

God, I wish that were me... It looks so fun in there.

I continued watching while munching on the sweets that Rihyarda had brought us. Soon enough, Hannelore and the two princes exited the archive while discussing something.

“Um, Lady Rozemyne... could you please join us inside for a moment?” Hannelore asked. “There are so many ancient documents, and we are struggling to tell what they are about. Given that you can read Dunkelfelger’s history book, I imagine you are very familiar with ancient language, are you not?”

“Rozemyne,” Sigiswald added, “although it pains me deeply to have you break a promise with your guardians, might I request your help also?”

My heart wavered. I wanted to go in. I wanted to read all those unfamiliar books so, so much. But I didn’t want to get yelled at.

“E-Erm, but... I... I, um...”

I turned to Rihyarda and Leonore, seeking their permission. They both looked at me with concern, then lowered their eyes, signifying their refusal. Hildebrand was also giving me a pleading expression, not wanting me to go without him.

“Rozemyne. Come,” Anastasius said authoritatively.

“You must not use such a demanding tone,” Sigiswald interjected. “She is already cooperating out of the goodness of her heart.”

Anastasius shook his head. “You have the wrong idea, Brother. Her guardians in Ehrenfest have placed a very clear restriction on her, so she cannot enter unless we give her an excuse in the form of a royal decree that supersedes their orders. Thus... Rozemyne, assist us in reading the archive’s documents. This is an order directly from the royal family.”

An order from the royal family? Well, my hands are tied then! Woo-hoo!

“Rihyarda, Brunhilde, Leonore,” I said, returning my attention to them, “I can hardly refuse an order from the royal family, can I?”

They collectively sighed.

“Milady, anyone can see that you are beside yourself with excitement.”

“I agree that you cannot refuse an order from the royal family, but...”

“You must not get *too* excited, Lady Rozemyne.”

Indeed, there was no refusing a royal decree. I stood up from my chair with a smile and said, “Allow me to go, then.” And with that, I eagerly stepped through the invisible barrier.

“Rozemyne.” Schwartz looked up at me, head cocked. “Not enough prayer.”

“Hm? What?” I asked, blinking in confusion.

Hannelore followed in after me. “Oh, did Schwartz say something to you as well, Lady Rozemyne?”

“Yes. He said that I am not praying enough, or something of the sort.”

“I do not understand it either, but I was told the same: ‘Not enough elements. Not enough prayer.’”

The princes had apparently received identical messages. We pondered what it could mean, but Anastasius merely shrugged and said, “If not even Rozemyne, her duchy’s High Bishop, has prayed

enough, then there is no point thinking about this any further.”

“True. Now, let us begin...”

There was no point musing any longer; it was time to read. My hands first went for a book resting on a nearby table, but Anastasius stopped me and instead took me to a shelf packed with white slates.

“The books there are written in relatively modern language,” he said. “We can read those just fine. You begin here.”

“Hannelore said you could read this language, Rozemyne, but is that truly the case?” Sigiswald asked.

Anastasius pulled out and then handed me one of the lined-up slates. It was made of the same ivory stone as the building itself, and there was ancient text carved into it. These would never degrade for as long as the Royal Academy and the library were supplied with mana.

Stone slates, hm? Very well suited for preservation. Though they're a bit heavy, and you can't fit much on them.

I ran a finger across the letters as I read them. “This is the process for performing a fairly ancient ritual. Mm... So this is what that part of the bible was referring to.”

It was a ritual stemming from a story about Leidenschaft's subordinates, who once got into such a heated fight that they created a blistering summer. In the end, it had fallen to Verfuhrmeier the Goddess of Oceans to cool their heads. In the same sense that Haldenzel's ritual was meant to bring forth summer, this one was meant to contain excessive heat waves.

The bible contained illustrations and the necessary lyrics for the ritual, as well as the story from which it had come, but this slate had actual instructions for performing it. If a similar slate existed for Haldenzel's ritual then we would probably be able to recreate it.

“I am personally interested in this subject and would like to research the connection between the bible and these rituals,” I said. “However, that is not what the royal family is looking for right now. I will check each in order, Schwartz, so please bring them to me one by one, starting from the leftmost slate on the top shelf.”

“Right away.”

I read through each slate that Schwartz brought me. Meanwhile, Sigiswald and Anastasius went through the relatively new information recorded in proper books, while Hannelore tried to read the ivory boards at a much slower pace. After reading about various rituals, I was finally handed one about something else.

“Prince Sigiswald, Prince Anastasius, will these be of use to the royal family?” I asked. “They are the memoirs of a sovereign from long ago, describing their mana compression method and what divine protections they obtained. The latter parts in particular may also

prove useful for our joint research with Dunkelfelger.”

The memoir seemed quite official in nature, but it was essentially a how-to book explaining how the author had become sovereign—peppered with a healthy number of complaints about the hardships it had all entailed.

“However, it seems that details considered to be common sense were omitted, most likely because of the limited space. There are some spots that I cannot grasp the meaning of without this context.”

“Such as what? Give us a literal translation.”

“This part reads, ‘I circled around and around, offering prayers to all the gods.’ But where would they have been circling? And how were they doing it? Were they performing a dedication whirl or something? Is there a place to circle around in the Sovereignty?” I asked, firing off one question after another as I envisioned the former sovereign whirling around in prayer.

Anastasius frowned. “Given your status as a High Bishop, I do not think there is anyone in the Royal Academy who knows more about prayers than you. Is there nothing in the temple that would explain this? That is, offering prayers while circling something...”

“I imagine it refers not to spinning but to repeating a route and praying to various gods,” Sigiswald coolly suggested.

Thus vanished from my mind the image of a spinning king. I had been seriously concerned about the practices of this ancient culture, but going to various places to pray to various gods made complete sense.

“That said, when I offer prayers in the temple, I either have the divine instruments brought to me, or I go to the chapel,” I noted. “And not once have I needed to circle any routes to offer prayers to certain gods.”

Sure, I traveled all across Ehrenfest for Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival, but I prayed to the same gods everywhere during those.

As I mulled over the phrasing of the text, I suddenly remembered something that Monika had said.

“Ah! One of my attendants in the temple once said that there are statues and carvings of the gods all throughout the building. If every temple is the same, perhaps those of the past had to walk around, praying to each god as they went.”

“That may be it,” Anastasius said, frowning once again.

Sigiswald gave a contemplative look. “As this memoir seems valuable, I must ask you to translate it into modern language and provide a transcription for us to reference. A direct interpretation can always be done later by scholars, but I am confident that your translation will prove the most accurate, owing to your familiarity

with the temple and prayers.”

“Understood. In that case, I will return to the reading room to acquire paper and some ink from Philine,” I said. “Naturally, my scholars cannot come to me.”

“Allow me to send for it instead,” Hannelore interjected, raising her voice. “You are the only one familiar with this ancient language, Lady Rozemyne; it would be best for you to stay here and continue checking the documents. I shall speak to your attendants for you.”

“I... I could not ask you to do that, Lady Hannelore!”

Sending the archduke candidate of a greater duchy on an errand for me was out of the question—but even as I desperately shook my head in refusal, Sigiswald nodded with a smile.

“We are very grateful for your offer, Hannelore. Take some time to rest once you have spoken to Rozemyne’s attendant. You have been working tirelessly since we arrived.”

Oh, right. She needs a break.

I could easily become so absorbed in my reading that I’d neglect meals and even sleep, but other, more normal people needed to take breaks. That much had completely slipped my mind. I watched as Hannelore exited the archive, then looked back down at the white slates.

“Rozemyne,” Sigiswald said, “it has come to my attention that you are doing research on the acquisition of divine protections. Is it true that you can obtain more through prayer alone?”

“There is without doubt a direct connection between prayer and obtaining divine protections. There are various conditions, however. One must pray often and sincerely, and generously offer up mana, for example. The apprentice knights from Dunkelfelger who are known for obtaining the divine protections of Leidenschaft and Angriff will play a crucial role in identifying how important each condition may be.”

Sigiswald sighed, looking down at the former sovereign’s memoir. “I obtained divine protections from all of the primary gods whose elements I possess but did not feel any significant changes. At most, my mana became slightly easier to use. So, what changes when one obtains the protections of subordinate gods? I find myself torn over whether I should prioritize prayer or the duties expected of the current royal family.”

By that, he probably meant that he couldn’t afford to be reading documents in an archive when he needed to nigh constantly supply the mana required to support Yurgenschmidt.

“Prince Sigiswald, even when time is of the essence, it is wiser to take the safe detour than the dangerous shortcut. I can only recommend the more reliable option here.”

“What do you mean?”

I smiled. “It may seem time-consuming to focus on compression methods, spend time here reading documents, and try to obtain divine protections through prayer, but in the end, things will only improve if you have more mana and protections. One’s mana efficiency increases significantly when one has the divine protections of many subordinate gods.”

“How significantly?” he asked, his dark-green eyes widening.

“I imagine it depends on the individual, but my elder brother Wilfried obtained the divine protection of twelve gods in total and said that he can now brew things using about seventy percent as much mana as before.”

“Seventy percent... And exactly how much would one need to pray to obtain those results?” There was a biting intensity in his eyes. That alone told me just how much pressure the royal family was under and how desperately they needed mana.

“You obtained more protections than that brother of yours, correct?” Anastasius asked me with a glare. “How efficient did *your* mana become?”

I pressed my lips together. Was this a question I should answer, or was hiding the truth more important? Either way, the royal family needed to learn the effects of praying.

“If you intend to announce the effects of praying in the temple at the Interduchy Tournament, then there is no reason you cannot tell us here.”

“I was planning to minimize my presence during the announcement, as I am too much of an outlier... but as I wish for the royal family to understand the importance of prayer, I will speak honestly. Not even Ehrenfest knows the precise number of protections I obtained, however, so please keep this to yourselves.”

Anastasius looked at Sigiswald, then they both nodded. “Consider it a promise.”

“I was granted divine protection from forty-three gods in total, and my mana expenditure dropped to perhaps forty percent of what it used to be. For brewing and supplying mana, I use less than half as much mana as before, to the point that I’ve even been struggling to manage it properly.”

“Less than half?!” Sigiswald cried out in shock. “Just how much have you been praying?”

“I must insist that you keep this to yourselves,” I stressed, then wrote down a prayer on my diptych. “In Ehrenfest, we pray to the gods when supplying mana to the foundational magic. I am told that even Aub Ehrenfest was granted the divine protection of multiple subordinates due to this practice. As one needs only to chant this

prayer while supplying mana, perhaps it will be ideal for the extraordinarily busy royal family.”

“Is that really it?” Anastasius asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

“Of course, if you wish for a true abundance of divine protections, then you must proactively visit the temple and perform religious ceremonies. The sincerity with which you do these things is also important. However, I expect that your being members of the royal family leaves you without the time or the leeway this would require, and you would doubtless butt heads with the Sovereign temple if you were to suddenly take charge of their ceremonies. Instead, start with the very basics. Before you know it, you will be praying so naturally that blessings will spill out on their own.”

Right now, their priority needed to be getting used to the process—although it was possible that some would view them strangely or get mad at them even then. I had experienced that myself.

“I have yet to verify this with my own research,” I said, “but it seems that divine protections can be obtained even after coming of age. If you all pray regularly while supplying mana, then things should be a lot more comfortable for you a number of years down the line.”

“Even after coming of age? Just how much information is Ehrenfest hiding?”

“We were not hiding any of this. Before I performed the ritual for obtaining divine blessings, I thought it was normal to pray when supplying mana to the foundational magic.”

Plus, pretty much all of the information they thought we were “hiding” had come from Ferdinand. He was the one who had been keeping it all a secret, if anyone—though I naturally wasn’t about to say that.

“Lady Rozemyne, here are the paper and ink you need,” Hannelore said upon her return, stationery in hand. I accepted it with a polite thank-you and then got straight to work translating the sovereign’s memoir.

“Next, we shall take a break ourselves,” Sigiswald announced. “Hannelore, my apologies, but I must ask you to transcribe this board onto paper.”

“Understood, Prince Sigiswald.”

I watched the two princes leave the archive, then sighed in relief.

Hannelore exhaled in turn, then gave me a gentle smile. “To think that Prince Anastasius’s summons has resulted in our being here with not one, but three princes. It was quite the surprise to see them in the library, would you not say?”

“Indeed. I could not believe my eyes when I saw Prince

Sigiswald.”

Though I saw him in the prince's villa before we came to the library.

“I also did not think I would be tasked with transcribing things,” Hannelore continued. “I assumed that I would only be asked to help open the door. Ancient language is not a specialty of mine, so I am heartened to have you here with me.”

“I must say, I am impressed by how much you can read,” I replied, keeping up the brief exchange while working on my translation. “Not even those of the royal family seem to have much of a grasp on ancient language, though they *are* prioritizing their other duties.”

“Oh, this seems to be a ceremony for royal succession,” Hannelore said all of a sudden, peering at the slate in her hands. Something like that would never be done in Ehrenfest's temple, so I took a peek myself, my interest drawn. “I am fairly confident in my assertion, as it says here that ‘the new sovereign must present their Grutrissheit,’ but...”

“No, I think you are correct. This does seem to be a succession ceremony.”

I wonder how the current king succeeded the throne when he doesn't have a Grutrissheit...

Such questions drifted through my mind. Hannelore gave me the slate, having determined that it was of no use to the current royal family, and asked Schwartz to bring her a new one.

I went ahead and read the slate a little more closely. During the royal succession ceremony, the High Bishop would apparently wear the crown of the Goddess of Light—maybe because she presided over promises and contracts.

Wait, is this a spell...?

The slate also contained what seemed to be an incantation for transforming one's schtappe. I copied it onto my diptych.

Ferdinand definitely came here all the time. I bet he made it his mission to read absolutely everything!

Slates containing information on other rituals similarly detailed spells for making the God of Darkness's cape and the Goddess of Earth's chalice. I had wondered why Ferdinand and Ferdinand alone knew so many random things, and now I had my answer.

I'm gonna read everything too!

After reading until the library closed, I returned my key to the office's storage box. My time in the archive had taught me a lot about various rituals, as well as the spells needed to turn my schtappe into any divine instrument that I desired. Poring over so many documents and absorbing so much information had almost made me drunk with satisfaction; I was actually starting to waver on my feet.

“The archive can be opened as long as we three key owners are present,” I said, “and without any members of royalty present, there will be no need to clear the library of students. Thus, in place of the busy royal family, I shall return here often to continue my reading.”

Such was my intention, but both Rihyarda and Anastasius swiftly shot me down.

“That will not do, milady. You have many other things to prioritize, such as your joint research projects with greater duchies. Furthermore, we cannot risk you entering an archive inaccessible to your attendants without someone of higher status to drag you out.”

“Your attendant speaks wisely. We cannot allow you to enter alone when you become so intently focused that you ignore even our calls. Not to mention, you only ever made progress on the transcription when we kept a close eye on you; otherwise, you became too absorbed in your reading.”

I desperately searched for someone to back me up but to no avail; everyone was in agreement with Rihyarda and Anastasius.

How can this be happening?! I don't have a single ally!

I turned to Sigiswald, the highest authority in our group. If anyone could save me now, it was him.

He looked at Hortensia and Hannelore with a peaceful smile. “I hereby forbid anyone from entering the underground archive until we of the royal family call again. Hortensia, Hannelore—you must not use your keys, no matter how many times Rozemyne may ask.”

“Understood.”

We had just discovered the most fascinating archive, and we had barely even skimmed the surface! Yet here I was, forbidden from accessing it for the foreseeable future. I was so disappointed that I trudged my way back to the dormitory, feeling empty.

Upon our return, Rihyarda started tearing into me for all of my mistakes. My offenses included giving Sigiswald half-baked answers while keeping my eyes glued to my documents and clinging to them so tightly that Anastasius had needed to tear them out of my hands before evicting me from the archive so unsympathetically that he might as well have dragged me by the scruff of my neck.

Wilfried shook his head at me, evidently disappointed. “Weren't you told to avoid the royal family as much as possible?”

Look, Wilfried... that part isn't my fault, at least.

Dunkelfelger's Ritual

Several days after visiting the library's archive, an ordonnanz arrived from Rauffen: "How about we play ditler in the knight building?" The bird repeated this three times, after which I sent my response.

"Only after we do the joint research."

Another ordonnanz appeared soon after, this one from Hannelore. "My apologies," it said in her voice. "The previous message was supposed to be about our research, not ditler."

And so, we accepted the invitation.

"Rozemyne, it seems pretty obvious that you'll do something crazy with this joint research," Wilfried said. "That's why I'm coming with you to the knight dormitory."

"Dearest brother," Charlotte interjected, "do you not simply wish to accompany her because of your interest in ditler?"

Wilfried faltered. Although he probably was curious about the ritual, Charlotte was right on the money. The boys in the dormitory had grown especially passionate about ditler ever since reading Roderick's story about it.

"As I expect our dear brother to be unable to concentrate, and I am personally interested in this research, I shall come as well," Charlotte announced. "May I, Sister?"

Never in a million years would I turn down my hardworking Charlotte, especially when she just wanted to learn about the ritual in preparation for her own next year. It was my duty as an older sister to grant the wishes of my cute little sister.

"Of course you can," I replied. "And as both of you are going to be in attendance, we may have your apprentice scholars help as well."

I wasted no time gathering their apprentice scholars in the common room, then distributed sheets of paper and started explaining how to conduct questionnaires. Naturally, with no printing presses in the dormitory, preparing identical copies was far from easy. That was why each scholar was going to take a sheet listing all the questions they were to ask, then transcribe the answers separately like a street reporter. This way, they only had to reproduce the question sheet once—and as long as the answers were written according to a template, putting everything together would prove simple enough.

"Lord Wilfried..."

“Give it up, Ignaz. Rozemyne’s suggesting some weird new way of doing things, sure, but we all know that we’ll need to learn it sooner or later. No matter how you might feel about this, you need to embrace it.”

After teaching the scholars how to go about conducting the questionnaire, we made our final preparations and went to the knight building. Rauffen was gathering the apprentice knights for us, and we were meeting him there in a large conference room. The knight building was extremely large—as one would expect, considering its many training grounds of various sizes—so one needed a highbeast to traverse it.

Leonore led us to our destination at once. We had gathered all our knights in their third year or above, and with three archduke candidates present, there was quite an abundance of retainers as well.

“So this is the knight building?”

“This is my first time here.”

Charlotte and I had alighted from our highbeasts and were looking around curiously—a sight that elicited a chuckle from Rihyarda. “Miladies, both of you have been here for the Interduchy Tournament,” she said. That much was true, but we had gone straight to the largest training grounds; we hadn’t been near the rooms where classes were actually held.

“I thought it would be a bit... *muskier* in here,” I mused aloud. After all, this was the building for apprentice knights who so often spent their time training. I had been expecting the offensive stench of deodorant that had always polluted the girls’ changing room after gym class back on Earth, or the thick scent of sweat that had so often come from the boys’, but there was nothing like that at all.

“Most perform waschen on themselves after training,” Matthias explained. “That is why there are no strong smells here like there are in the scholar building.”

Theodore seemed to recall the herbal scent of the scholar building and gave a half-smile.

Praise be to waschen.

I continued toward the conference room with that thought in mind, and soon enough we reached Rauffen, Lestilaut, and Hannelore. They welcomed us, and we exchanged greetings.

“Alright, let’s start ditter—”

“Professor Rauffen?”

“—*after* we explain and demonstrate the ritual.”

A stern glare from Hannelore had extracted a hasty correction from Rauffen, but I got the feeling that he still only cared about one thing. We couldn’t allow ourselves to be led astray by this ditter-obsessed professor.

The research is far more important, you know.

I exchanged a look with Hannelore, then we both nodded. "I wish to speak with the apprentice knights before the ditler ritual," I said. "You gathered apprentice knights of other duchies as well, correct? We should not keep them waiting."

"Lady Rozemyne is right; we must first speak to everyone. This is our promise to Ehrenfest. Ditler can wait until afterward."

"Yes, yes. Let us finish the talking first so that we can play ditler without any reservations," Rauffen said. He then strode on ahead, eager to get the less interesting part of today's meeting over and done with.

The wide classroom was filled with apprentice knights. I got Ehrenfest's ten apprentice scholars to sit at the row of desks at the far end of the room, where they arranged their question sheets, answer sheets, and ink.

"Everyone, I thank you for your cooperation," I said. "Ehrenfest's apprentice scholars will soon start asking you questions, and I must ask that you respond to them all. The final conclusions drawn from your answers will be announced at the Interduchy Tournament. Now, those of you from Klassenberg, please form a line here. You may leave in that direction when you are done."

Processes like this were easy to carry out here in the Royal Academy, since everything was decided by duchy rank. The students within each duchy could then be separated further into arch, med, and lay ranks, then class years, but I decided to leave that for them to sort out among themselves.

And so, the ten scholars began conducting the questionnaire. They had practiced thoroughly, so there was little confusion or uncertainty; everything progressed smoothly.

"That's it. Can the next person come forth?" Philine asked, raising a hand.

I guided the next apprentice knight standing in line over to Philine. Then, once we had gone through most of the Klassenberg apprentices, I called for those of the next duchy.

My main role here was guiding the knights, and it seemed that things were going smoothly thanks to my contribution. As I was feeling satisfied with myself, Brunhilde brought over some attendants.

"Lady Rozemyne, we have observed the guiding process," she said. "We will take over from here. It seems that Professor Rauffen is eager to discuss the upcoming game of ditler."

I would rather more of this than a conversation about ditler, though.

But as he was the highest authority in the joint research project, avoidance wasn't an option. Rihyarda and I headed to the corner of the room where the other archduke candidates had cemented

themselves.

“This is an unusual manner of giving questions,” Hannelore said.

“There’s a certain convenience to asking the same questions in one-on-one situations,” I replied. “The gathered apprentice knights are all in their third year or above, but when are they actually taught the song and dance used in the ritual? It seems that Ehrenfest’s first-years know it already...”

I shot Theodore a look at that last remark. He had told me that Rauffen had willingly taught the Ehrenfest first-years the process as a result of our joint research project.

“Even first-years visit the knight building for training, so they are taught them immediately. However, those not from Dunkelfelger are largely unfamiliar with the process and thus do not take it seriously. More did this year, however, as we mentioned that it could increase the likelihood of receiving divine protections from the gods.”

The same was true for Ehrenfest’s apprentice knights—when Leonore had heard about Dunkelfelger’s ritual in the dormitory, she had said, “I simply did not see the point of performing it at the time. Had I understood its importance for obtaining divine protections from the gods, then I would have taken it more seriously.”

“So, Lady Rozemyne—shall we talk about the rules for today’s ditter?” Rauffen said, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

“The usual ones are fine with me.”

“But that would be speed ditter...”

“Indeed. We will not need to fuss over rules if we stick with the norm, will we?”

Rauffen stared at me for three whole seconds, lost for words, then suddenly cried, “But why?! How could you write such a passionate, glorious tale about treasure-stealing ditter but not want to play it yourself?!”

“I am not the one who wrote *A Ditter Story*—and each game takes quite some time, does it not? I am simply here to see the ritual for my research. Speed ditter will do just fine.”

Rauffen stood paralyzed in shock, while the nearby Dunkelfelger apprentice knights stared at me with their mouths agape. It seemed that they had all been convinced that we were about to play treasure-stealing ditter.

“But Lady Rozemyne...”

“One does not need to play treasure-stealing ditter to hold the ritual, correct? Or, what, does Dunkelfelger not treat speed ditter seriously?” It was well established that a game of ditter needed to be played for our research, but Dunkelfelger had never specified what kind.

Hannelore nodded with a smile. “Just as Lady Rozemyne says,

ditter is ditter, whether it be for speed or treasure. The ritual can be performed either way, and Dunkelfelger *always* takes its games seriously. I also believe that speed ditter is ideal for our purposes here.”

“You may have a point, Lady Hannelore, but...”

Hannelore was speaking as a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate; Rauffen and the other students were in no position to protest. Her small interjection had cemented the fact that we were going to be playing speed ditter.

“Still, Professor Rauffen—I am glad to see that you are enjoying *A Ditter Story* enough to have become so emotionally invested in treasure-stealing ditter,” I said.

“The story has rocketed in popularity in the Dunkelfelger Dormitory. Was the protagonist’s strategy inspired by advice from Lord Ferdinand, perchance? I recall going up against it myself...”

I sighed. “I did allow the author to borrow his ditter strategy notes. Ferdinand did not come up with the story, however, nor did he directly assist with its writing.”

“I look forward to the next volume. When can we expect it?”

He had evidently been infected with the bookworm virus, symptoms of which included dying with anticipation for the next volumes of one’s favorite series. It was all going according to plan.

“The sequel will release... Well, we still need Lord Lestilaut’s illustrations, so at some point after then. We also intend to rebind the first volume to include his work.”

Since the books were only held together with string, we could easily unbind them to add new pages—although the process would no doubt be time-consuming. We would probably do something similar with the second volume, offering a preview copy without the illustrations and then inserting them later. My original plan had been to bring an artist to Ehrenfest after my graduation, but I wasn’t sure what to do when I was already buying illustrations from another duchy, so the idea was kind of sitting on the back burner for now.

I never expected to hire an archduke candidate about to graduate!

“The illustrations are already done, you know,” Lestilaut noted. “I do not have them with me now, but you may see them at a later date. Hm... Perhaps when you show us your ritual or what have you.”

“I eagerly await the opportunity.”

Though we’ll first need to decide on the price and how to do the handover.

As I contemplated my future options, I carefully listened to the Dunkelfelger retainers giving their thoughts on *A Ditter Story*. Soon enough, we had all the answers we needed.

“We will compile the answers upon our return to our dormitory,” I

said. "We will then inform Dunkelfelger of the results before they are announced at the Interduchy Tournament."

"Lady Rozemyne, at the very least, let us help organize the answers," Clarissa said. "As it stands, the 'joint' nature of this research is true in name alone; I have not contributed at all."

All of the Dunkelfelger apprentice scholars overseeing our joint research nodded along vigorously. I was intending to compare my ritual with theirs, so this was a collaborative effort in that sense, but it was true that they hadn't been involved with any of the questioning. It was probably a good idea to give them a task of some kind.

"In that case, let us organize the answers in Ehrenfest's tea party room. I wish to have the results posthaste, so we shall start tomorrow morning when classes begin. All those who are free may come."

"Understood. I will come no matter what, through rain or snow," Clarissa declared, clenching her fists and grinning happily.

"Are you certain about this, Lady Rozemyne?" Hannelore asked, looking concerned. "Should I also attend?"

I-Is she really that concerned about Clarissa coming along?

I suddenly felt uneasy myself, so I asked Hannelore to attend as a Dunkelfelger authority to keep an eye on her. But while I was still mid-sentence, Lestilaut suddenly shot his head up.

"I will go, then. I must be responsible for our duchy's students."

"But you have classes, Brother, do you not? I have already written to Mother that you became so absorbed in your illustrations that you allowed your attendance to slip."

Oh, Hannelore! You're so reliable!

As my heart throbbed, Charlotte gave a refined giggle. "Lady Hannelore, you are entirely like Rihyarda when she stops my sister from finding some absurd excuse to read."

"You have a point," Wilfried added. "But I would much prefer a cute warning from someone like Lady Hannelore to a scolding from Rihyarda."

"Wilfried, my boy, what exactly do you mean by that?" Rihyarda asked. She punctuated her question with a chuckle, but her tone had sounded so dark that Wilfried immediately stiffened up.

I gave him a small but supportive nod. *I understand how you feel, Wilfried. Even if only a little.*

After finishing the questionnaires, we moved to the training grounds to play speed ditter. My objective was to absorb the ancient song and dance that Dunkelfelger performed as an offering to the fighting-type gods before games. I hadn't seen other people perform rituals very often, so I was very much looking forward to it.

As this was joint research, those of other duchies were disallowed

from watching. Those of us spectating were going to be looking down at the grounds from the upper stands, much like during the Interduchy Tournament. There were no chairs this time, so we needed to stand, but it was otherwise the same.

We ended up with Ehrenfest at one end of the stands and Dunkelfelger at the other, but the Dunkelfelger side had way more people. It was hard to tell whether that was because they had more apprentice knights or because they were simply that much more excited about ditler.

“Rozemyne, they have a larger audience than us,” Wilfried said. “Should we call over the students of lower grades who wanted to watch?”

I looked at the surprisingly large crowd that was Dunkelfelger’s group and nodded. “We might as well invite anyone who wishes to join us and provide their support.”

Charlotte sent out an ordonnanz at once, and it wasn’t long before pretty much all of our students arrived. Even then, we couldn’t compare to Dunkelfelger’s enthusiasm.

“Now, let us begin!” boomed Rauffen’s voice. “All participating apprentice knights, descend to the grounds so that we might show our ritual to Ehrenfest!”

Dunkelfelger’s apprentice knights produced their highbeasts and flew down to the grounds as instructed, while the other students hooted and hollered in celebration. If they could get this excited over speed ditler, then there really hadn’t been a reason for us to play the treasure-stealing variety.

“Well, Hannelore?”

“The rest is up to you, Brother.”

Lestilaut nodded, used a feystone to envelop his black Royal Academy uniform in light armor, then descended to the grounds with the others. The apprentice knights formed a circle around him as he raised his schtappe and shouted, “Grant power to those of us going into battle!”

“*Lanze!*”

The apprentice knights all transformed their schtappes into spears.

“We are those who offer prayers and gratitude to the gods who have created the world,” came the familiar introduction. Then, they all thumped their spears into the ground at once. “Grant us power so that we might obtain victory. Grant us Angriff’s mighty power, which is second to none. Grant us speed so that we might obtain victory. Grant us Steifebrise’s speed, which is second to none.”

Like the ceremony performed in Haldenzel, the song was based on a prayer in the bible. The surrounding apprentice knights began moving their spears while praying to the gods related to combat,

doing what appeared to be some kind of sword dance. They spun them around, then thrust them into the ground. Then, they drew their weapons from the earth and pounded them against their feystone armor, producing a metallic chorus.

From the center of the circle, Lestilaut swung his spear and danced like the other apprentice knights. He twirled and twirled, yet he was in complete control of his polearm. That explained why his dedication whirling was superb.

“Lady Hannelore, can you also whirl while wielding a spear?” I asked, my eyes still glued to Lestilaut.

Hannelore gave a somewhat shy smile. “I am being made to practice, naturally, but I am not very talented. I would not dare attempt it in front of others.”

“Naturally”? I can’t believe that even tiny, timid Lady Hannelore can perform such a crazy-looking dance. Dunkelfelger really is something else.

Lestilaut then thrust his spear up into the air and shouted, “Fight!” The apprentice knights roared in response and copied the gesture as if attempting to pierce the heavens.

All of the Dunkelfelger students watching from the stands were cheering along, which hyped the rest of us up even more. It was clear that the whirling apprentice knights were unified in their enthusiasm, which they were directing to the upcoming battle.

“This is incredible...” Judithe muttered, in a daze. “It’s totally different from when they taught us during training.”

The other apprentice knights nodded in agreement, dumbfounded.

“And we’re about to fight them,” Matthias said. He and everyone else were completely absorbed in Dunkelfelger’s performance. The battle hadn’t even begun, but we were already losing spiritually. That wouldn’t do at all.

“Laurenz, I know that Professor Rauffen taught our apprentice knights the ritual, but can we actually perform the song and dance?” I asked.

“Yes, more or less,” he replied. “Though, um, Lady Rozemyne... Don’t tell me...”

I smiled. “Fight fire with fire, as they say.”

“But performing it now won’t hype us up as much as an initial dance would...”

I couldn’t help but cackle. “Giving blessings is my specialty, I’ll have you know.”

Having deduced my intentions, Leonore smiled. “In that case, Lady Rozemyne, please take the central position and sing to improve our morale.”

I produced my highbeast alongside the apprentice knights who would be playing ditter, but Wilfried grabbed my hand before I could

do anything else. “I don’t know what you’re planning, Rozemyne, but I think you should drop it,” he said, frowning. “My pattern recognition skills are good enough that I can tell you going down there is going to cause major problems.”

“At most, we are only copying Dunkelfelger, dear brother. My aim is just to raise the spirits of our troops.” I pointed at our apprentice knights, who were still dispirited in the face of our opponents’ passionate display.

Charlotte put a contemplative hand on her cheek. “Erm, Sister... Dunkelfelger cannot perform the follow-up ritual unless they win, so should you not leave things be? There does not seem to be a need for you to mimic the ritual.”

“Now that you mention it... that *is* true.”

Dunkelfelger performed rituals before *and* after dinner, with the latter being to celebrate victory and offer their thanks to the gods. But as I moved to dismiss my highbeast, Lestilaut returned from the grounds and waved at me.

“You should take this opportunity to perform it,” he said. “Will our research not require you to compare what happens when our two duchies perform the same ritual?”

“W-Well... you certainly are correct about that, Lord Lestilaut...”

Wilfried and Charlotte exchanged looks of concern.

“I am interested in seeing whether the same ritual carried out at the same time and in the same place can produce different results depending on who performed it,” Lestilaut said forcefully. “Do it. For the sake of our research.”

“Very well. For the sake of our research,” I said, nodding. I then made my way down to the grounds with the apprentice knights. Once I arrived, Judithe indicated where I was to stand.

“Can you really do that song and dance, Lady Rozemyne?” she whispered, sounding fragile.

I could see the Ehrenfest apprentice knights looking worried about performing the same ritual that Dunkelfelger had just done so well. Leonore alone had realized that I was using this as an excuse to give a discreet blessing, and she directed the apprentice knights to take their positions.

“Not in the least,” I replied. “Today was my first time seeing it. I am simply going to follow Lord Lestilaut’s example by holding up a spear with all of you. It seemed a good opportunity to stealthily give everyone Angriff’s blessing.”

Judithe’s violet eyes widened, then she gave me a small smile. “Doesn’t that mean this won’t be the same ritual as Dunkelfelger’s? We won’t be able to justify it as part of our research.”

“Worry not—aside from the words of prayer, it won’t be any

different. Giving everyone a blessing is my main concern, but we can still use it for our research, no?”

Judithe nodded and then returned to her spot. Leonore soon took her place at my side, whereupon she informed me that everyone was in position and told me a few things to be wary of. To summarize, I just needed to nail the beginning and end.

I scanned the apprentice knights surrounding me. From what I remembered, the first step was for me to call out and transform my schtappe into a spear.

“Grant power to those of us going into battle!” I declared. And then: “*Lanze!*”

I whipped out my schtappe and turned it into Leidenschaft’s spear. The apprentice knights all managed to transform their schtappes in turn, but their eyes were locked on mine in shock.

Oh, right... I revealed a glimpse of this spear during class last year, but I guess I never showed the apprentice knights.

Leidenschaft’s spear wasn’t exactly something that was shown to everyone, so perhaps my retainers who visited the temple were the only ones who had seen it. Still, this was no time for them to be standing around, awestruck.

Come on. Don’t look at me. Start singing!

I glared at the apprentice knights, slammed my spear against the ground, and said in my loudest voice, “We are those who offer prayers and gratitude to the gods who have created the world.” The sudden impact and the familiar prayer snapped the apprentice knights out of their stupor, and they immediately began to swing their spears around and sing.

“Grant us power so that we might obtain victory. Grant us Angriff’s mighty power, which is second to none. Grant us speed so that we might obtain victory. Grant us Steifebrise’s speed, which is second to none.”

I stood in place with my spear in hand. Although I couldn’t sing with them—I couldn’t remember the song—I did remember the prayer. I chanted it quietly enough that my voice was lost among the others.

Now I just need to shout “Fight!” at the end and raise my spear up high, right?

I waited for that very moment, then thrust my spear toward the sky and cried, “Fight!” An instant later, a loud *boom* resounded throughout the training grounds.

“Bwuh-guh?!” I cried, unconsciously letting out my goofiest noise in quite some time. Nobody seemed to notice, however; they were all focused on the mana that had shot out of my transformed schtappe.

I slowly lowered my arm, my eyes turned heavenward. In my

hand was Leidenschaft's spear, drained of mana and no longer shining with blue light. Its feystones were transparent.

Next, I tried to see what had become of the mana that had fired out of me. If possible, I wanted it back... but I wasn't sure that was possible. It drew circles in the air and at some point became cloaked in a variety of colors. It was mostly blue, but I could see some yellow, red, and green in there too. The light then abruptly poured down on everyone, so dazzlingly bright that I closed my eyes on instinct.

I could see the light even through my eyelids, but it vanished before long. The sky was clear again by the time I opened my eyes again, and everyone was looking as dazed and confused as I was feeling.

After a prolonged silence, someone among the spectators cried, "What was that?!" The rest of the audience area started to buzz with noise immediately after. Those from Dunkelfelger were especially loud, while Wilfried and Charlotte had their heads in their hands. I could already tell that they were going to say, "We told you not to go!" the moment I got back.

"Lady Rozemyne, the match is about to begin, so please return to the audience area."

"Leonore, do you understand what just happened...?" I asked.

"You performed a large-scale blessing. That is as much as I gathered. Perhaps you should ask the others in the audience; they would have gotten a better view."

I gave up and returned to the stands. Wilfried and Charlotte were both cradling their heads, while Lestilaut and Hannelore practically leapt on me with questions.

"Lady Rozemyne, what in the world was that?" Hannelore asked.

"Never have I seen something like that happen during the ritual," Lestilaut added, his tone demanding. "What in the world did you do?!"

They were both interrogating me at once, and everyone else was eagerly awaiting my answers... but I wasn't sure myself.

"I... believe it was a blessing," I eventually said, "but as this was my first time performing the ritual, I cannot tell you precisely what happened. From down below, the light seemed to be multicolored, but how did it look from up here?"

They both exchanged glances, then Hannelore explained what they had seen. "You produced Leidenschaft's spear, correct? I may have seen it before, but the others had not and were very surprised as a result."

"And for good reason," Lestilaut added. "I remember getting a report some time ago saying that she can produce the spear, but who would have expected her to make the divine instrument here, of all

places?”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Hannelore pouted. “Brother, when I gave you that report, I remember you saying it was ‘obviously fake’ and then ignoring everything else I said about the matter.”

“It was the most beautiful sight that ever graced my eyes,” Clarissa interjected from the side. “I have seen that very same ritual performed in Dunkelfelger more times than I can count, but only now do I understand its true divinity. Lady Rozemyne, O Saint of Ehrenfest, we are blessed to be in your presence.”

“Um, Clarissa...”

I attempted to stop her, but she continued to rant, her blue eyes sparkling.

“Hark! For with hearty sparkling did the great blue light shoot from Leidenschaft’s spear, proving to all that it was the genuine article! As she clutched it with serene grace and sang her holy prayer, Lady Rozemyne became the very image of Mestionora herself, a resplendent beauty with the very gods’ permission to use their divine instruments at will. The sight claimed my heart, and verily I wept!”

“Shut her up,” Lestilaut said, grimacing at Clarissa. Certainly, our conversation wouldn’t be able to continue with her butting in and rambling to herself.

“From the very bottom of my heart, I am truly, *truly* grateful to have been given life, as it allowed me to witness such a miraculous sight!” Clarissa went on. “Oh, but why must I be so much older than you, and from a different duchy, Lady Rozemyne?! I want nothing more than to be with you here at the Royal Academy—to spend each year burning thy blessedness into mine eyes!”

“Clarissa,” I said, “I have a request for you.”

She turned to me at once. “And what might that be, Lady Rozemyne? Ask, and you shall receive!”

I presented several sheets of paper that Philine had brought with her. “Before you forget, I would like you to write a letter to Hartmut detailing what you saw here today. For his research, he will want to know even the smallest minutiae, and it would mean very much to me if you could provide as much detail as you can. Supporting your fiancé is an important job, is it not?”

“As much detail as I can... Understood. You can count on me!”

Clarissa accepted the papers and then began scrawling furiously. That would keep her quiet for a while.

“Now, let us continue,” I said, turning back to Lestilaut and Hannelore. “I copied Lord Lestilaut by raising my spear, and nothing more, so I was more surprised than anyone when it suddenly fired out the mana I’d put into it.”

“You were surprised too?” Wilfried muttered. “It sure didn’t look that way.”

Apparently, from their perspective, the mana had shot up into the air, developed color, and then rained down again.

“It seemed to me that a portion of the blessing flew off somewhere,” Charlotte said, eliciting nods from the others. This wasn’t something I’d noticed myself, but it had been clear as day to those watching from above.

“Where did it go, exactly?” I asked.

“I do not know. The most I can say is that, while the light was spinning in the air, a portion just... whooshed away.”

“Now that you mention it, I remember something similar happening during another ritual that I performed. Perhaps it occurs during all those that take place at the Royal Academy.”

Of course, I was referring to the ritual during which I’d obtained the names of the God of Darkness and the Goddess of Light, but I refrained from saying that outright. The topic was handled very cautiously even during archduke candidate class, and the last thing I wanted was any spontaneous combustion.

“You appeared to receive blessings from all the gods you prayed to, but what separates your ritual from Dunkelfelger’s?” Lestilaut asked, his expression thoughtful and serious. “Does one need to use Leidenschaft’s spear?”

I racked my brain for an explanation. “The spear could be a factor, as could the mana donated. It was the mana itself that went flying off, right? And you did not offer any, as I understand it.”

“The mana is offered during the ritual that follows a victory.”

“That is most likely the reason, then. Offering mana is essential for receiving blessings and divine protections from the gods.”

At some point during our discussion about rituals, the game of speed ditter had started. Rauffen summoned a feybeast to be defeated, and the Dunkelfelger knights riding their highbeasts leapt into action. Their coordination was impeccable, as always.

Once they were done, it was Ehrenfest’s turn. This was a highly anticipated moment if ever there was one; the spectators were leaning forward to see just what our knights could do after receiving such a grand blessing.

“Begin!” came the call.

The fight had officially started and the feybeast was summoned... but everyone was acting weird. Some charged forward at tremendous speed only to fall flat on their faces as though someone had suddenly stepped on the brake. Judithe aimed a shot from far away, as expected of our specialist sniper, but her attack ended up flying in a completely different direction. They were all moving so... unusually. Something

had to be wrong.

“Did something happen?”

“Everyone is moving so strangely...”

Wilfried and Charlotte expressed their concerns, causing Lestilaut to scoff. “Are you sure you gave them a blessing and not some bizarre kind of curse?”

“Brother!” Hannelore exclaimed—but everyone else’s reactions seemed to suggest that he was right. Something really was wrong.

“Hyaaah!”

However, while everyone was bumbling about like this was some kind of comedy skit, Traugott alone roared a battle cry and charged toward the feybeast. The sword in his hands was packed with mana and shone with an iridescent light.

“Hold it, Traugott!” Matthias shouted. “Uncontrolled mana is dangerous!”

“We’ll lose if we don’t hurry!”

“After all this fumbling, we’ve already lost! It’s not worth the risk!”

Traugott merely looked at Matthias with wide eyes, then lowered his sword in frustration.

“Bring it down to seventy percent, at least,” Matthias continued. “If you don’t, someone in the audience area might get hurt.”

“That would never happen. My mana isn’t that—”

“Right now, it is that dangerous. Contain your power when you attack.”

The light around Traugott’s sword dimmed as he obediently started containing his mana, then he launched a weakened attack. He was holding back, but even then, his strength was comparable to that of our very own knight commander, Karstedt. Traugott’s single blow vaporized the feybeast entirely.

Traugott had that much mana? I wondered, blinking in surprise as Rauffen made his announcement.

“Time! Victory goes to... Dunkelfelger!”

“I’m going to go ask the apprentice knights what exactly Rozemyne’s blessing did to them...” Wilfried said, then produced his highbeast and flew down to meet them. Charlotte and I followed, as did Lestilaut and Hannelore.

By the time we reached the grounds, Wilfried was already speaking with the knights.

“Can you tell me what the problem was?”

“I was really struggling to control my mana. It was a battle just trying to move...”

They hadn’t experienced any problems when moving around normally on their highbeasts, but trying to speed up with mana had

made them go super fast, and trying to slow down had made them come to an abrupt stop. Then, whenever they had attacked, they had felt greater recoil than ever before—far more than they were able to take.

“Was the blessing too much, then?” I asked. Perhaps it had put them all in a state similar to after I performed my divine protections ritual, when I was barely able to control my mana.

The apprentice knight nodded. “Most likely. Our bodies could not keep up with it.”

In short, we had lost because our knights were so over-blessed that they couldn’t even move properly. How humiliating. We would have played better without my assistance, even if we’d still ended up losing.

“So it *was* more of a curse than a blessing...” Wilfried said.

Charlotte nodded. “Sister, you must be more careful with how much mana you use when giving blessings.”

They were both right—and at a time like this, the only thing I could do was hang my head in shame. “My apologies, Lord Lestilaut, Lady Hannelore. I, um... had no idea this would happen... I did not intend to use the ritual that Dunkelfelger has protected and treasured for so many centuries to place, erm, a horrible curse upon my own apprentice knights.”

Hannelore smiled. “Your timing was simply unfortunate, Lady Rozemyne. This is a new discovery for us all, so please do not feel so down.”

Bwehhh... Lady Hannelore is so kind. She’s my soulmate!

As I was gushing over my dear friend, Lestilaut flourished his cape and pointed to the center of the arena. “It is time for the final ritual, Hannelore,” he said. “You go.”

“Understood, Brother.”

Hannelore climbed into her highbeast and flew to the center of the arena, as instructed. Lestilaut watched her go for a moment, then turned to me and said, “Only knights may remain here. We must return to the audience.”

And so, we promptly returned to the stands. I couldn’t tell what Hannelore was saying from so far away, but she morphed her schtappe into a staff that I didn’t recognize and slowly started spinning it in a circle above her head.

“Lord Lestilaut, what is that staff?” I asked. Its tip was decorated with a large feystone that looked a lot like a jewel, flanked by what appeared to be the wings of a bat or the extended gills of a fish.

“It is said to belong to Verfuhremeer the Goddess of Oceans. Though I cannot say whether that is true.”

It definitely was; I could practically hear the crashing of waves

against the shore with each turn of Hannelore's staff. The sounds soon filled the air, and mana gradually began gently rising from the Ehrenfest apprentice knights like a haze.



If I'm the Saint of Ehrenfest, then Hannelore must be the Saint of Dunkelfelger.

I continued to watch, feeling thoroughly moved as the mana twisted up into the air like waves. Lestilaut, in contrast, was rubbing his eyes in disbelief.

"What is that...?"

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Is it not the usual ritual that Dunkelfelger performs?"

"It is, but this is my first time seeing this phenomenon."

"What?! I mean, it looks like mana is coming out of the Ehrenfest apprentice knights... Is everything going to be okay?"

"Who knows?"

"O-Oh no..."

I continued to look down at the grounds, feeling uneasy. In tune with Hannelore's spinning, the mana from the apprentice knights began swirling like a whirlpool, being sucked closer and closer to the center. Hannelore then thrust her staff up into the air and said something that I couldn't hear, at which point the swirl of mana flowed up to the heavens like a dragon.

Thus concluded the ritual. Hannelore returned to the stands, then so did the apprentice knights.

"Lady Hannelore, what in the world just happened...?" I asked.

Lestilaut added, "Never have I seen the ritual produce such results."

Hannelore gave a troubled smile. "I understand your prior confusion very well now, Lady Rozemyne. I similarly have no idea what happened. However, I sensed that stopping the ritual midway through would be unwise, so I finished it despite my uncertainty."

Leonore and Matthias provided answers in her stead.

"I believe that Dunkelfelger's closing ritual returns the blessings provided by the gods."

"I agree with Leonore—I could feel the blessing that Lady Rozemyne granted us fade and my mana return to normal. It also seems to have eased my excitement; my heartbeat is surprisingly steady considering all that has happened."

"So it has a calming effect?" Hannelore asked, blinking at the apprentice knights. "I suppose everyone *is* rather calm despite our recent victory..." She clasped her hands in front of her chest and whispered, "I must use this power well."

Even after such a great shock, Hannelore was so forward-thinking. Her ability to get back on her feet so quickly made her seem that much more like an archduke candidate of a greater duchy. In truth, seeing how great she was made me feel dumb for having simply

panicked and spun my wheels in confusion. I needed to learn from her example and focus instead on how I could use the ritual to our benefit.

Assuming I can manage how much mana I put into it a little better, this ritual would probably be useful for things like the Lord of Winter hunt. I'll need to do some research.

"There have been many unexpected developments today, but there have been many new discoveries as well," Lestilaut said.

"Overall, this has been a productive use of our time."

"We are glad to have been of use," Wilfried replied.

"So, when will Ehrenfest perform its ritual?"

Hannelore tugged on Lestilaut's cape. "Brother, we saw Lady Rozemyne's ritual mere moments ago, did we not?"

He shook his head. "She was copying us, not performing an Ehrenfest religious ceremony. The agreement was that, in return for us showing our ritual, they would show us theirs."

As he said, we had yet to uphold our side of the bargain.

"I'll ask again—when will Ehrenfest perform?" Lestilaut said, staring at me intently. His red eyes were overflowing with curiosity, and for good reason—we had already surprised him twice today, and that was with his own duchy's rituals.

"Well..." I scanned the faces before me. There was the apologetic Hannelore; the curious Lestilaut; the eager, quivering Clarissa; and the rest of the Dunkelfelger students. I smiled at them all and said, "Lord Lestilaut, contact us once you have finished all of your classes. Relations between our duchies would suffer if Aub Dunkelfelger were to believe that Ehrenfest books and rituals have caused your grades to plummet."

"That is a wonderful idea, Lady Rozemyne," Hannelore said cheerfully. Everyone else looked at Lestilaut, questioning whether he could manage it.

"Hmph!" Lestilaut scoffed. "Once I start taking them seriously, mere classes will take me no time at all to complete!" And with that declaration, he flourished his cape and strode away from the training grounds.

Talking and Tallying

“Rozemyne, what do you mean you will be leaving today’s report to everyone else?” Wilfried asked.

“Well, given that practically everyone in the dormitory was at the training grounds, your and Charlotte’s apprentice scholars included, I don’t see there being any confusion about what to write. Anyone can do it. I would rather spend this time preparing for tomorrow.”

There was much to report about today, but only my retainers could tally up all the answers we’d collected. Our follow-up on the questionnaire had been very abruptly scheduled to take place tomorrow in our tea party room, meaning we had to prepare tables and chairs. Plus, even though it wasn’t going to be an actual tea party, we were still going to be hosting Hannelore, an archduke candidate, to some degree.

“You may inform our father that I will write to him the day after tomorrow,” I continued, “and that my letter will be regarding our joint research with Dunkelfelger. I entrust the more urgent report to all of you.”

After assigning my attendants to prepare the tea party room, I went over the procedure for tallying the answers with Leonore, Judithe, and my apprentice scholars.

“I-Is that my sister doing scholar work?!” came an exclamation. “I can’t believe it!”

“Theodore, you only embarrass yourself when you make such remarks,” Judithe replied, puffing up with indignation. “I went to the temple as a guard all the time, you know. I may not be on Philine’s level, but I can do *some* work.”

In truth, back then, she had stealthily asked Philine and Roderick to submit her completed tasks along with theirs so that she wouldn’t have to be in the presence of the terrifying Ferdinand. There was no need to reveal that heartwarming secret here, though.

After all, she’s finally getting Theodore to look at her with respect. I need to help her protect her big-sister pride!

“Lady Rozemyne’s guard knights help with paperwork in the temple,” Leonore said. “Matthias, Laurenz, you will need to do the same when spring comes, whether you want to or not. You may use this opportunity to observe the process while guarding us.”

“Ngh... I’m so bad at scholar work,” Laurenz muttered, the color

draining from his face. “That was one of the reasons I became a knight in the first place...” Something told me that he and Angelica would hit it off right away.

Matthias simply responded with a calm nod. He didn’t seem particularly averse to doing scholar work.

“Milady, do start teaching the others how to tally on your behalf,” Rihyarda said. “You will need to host Lady Hannelore tomorrow.”

“But I am leading the joint research, am I not?” I replied. My intention had been to do some of the tallying myself, since I was something of an apprentice scholar too, but Rihyarda was evidently against the idea. We certainly couldn’t ask Hannelore to join us in doing such menial work, nor could we leave hosting her to my attendants, since I was going to be present as a fellow archduke candidate.

“Will you not need to discuss the details of that final ritual with Lady Hannelore?” Leonore asked. “It seems to be unique to Dunkelfelger, unlike the song taught to the apprentice knights.” She wanted to know what kind of prayer Hannelore had chanted in the arena, but she hadn’t been able to hear it properly. The prayer had also been spoken in an ancient language, which had only made it harder for her to understand.

Leonore continued, “It is quite impressive that Lady Hannelore could speak the ancient words so fluently—especially when she was not raised in the temple with such easy access to the bible as you were, Lady Rozemyne.”

I nodded along with her praise, at which point Lieseleta held out a sheet of paper listing tomorrow’s topics of conversation. “Their history book was thick and old, as we all saw,” she noted, giggling to herself. “I am sure that Dunkelfelger is filled with such ancient documents. Perhaps you could consult them about that? It will be a thrilling topic for you two bookworms.”

“That is a wonderful idea, Lieseleta.”

I had just been made aware of what she had *actually* meant by that statement: “Leave the tallying work to your scholars and gather intelligence that only an archduke candidate can obtain.” It really was a wise suggestion, so I nodded my assent.

It was coming up on second-and-a-half bell when we finished preparing the tea party room. We had secured space for the scholars to work, as well as a separate table at which Hannelore and I could talk. I’d ensured that we had plenty of cookies, since they were easy to grab and eat, while my attendants were prepared to pour tea at any time.

The ringing of a bell prompted Gretia to open the door, allowing a

group of Dunkelfelger students to enter. Leading them was Hannelore.

“Good day, Lady Rozemyne. I thank you ever so much for hosting us.”

“Good day, Lady Hannelore. We should be the ones thanking Dunkelfelger for assisting us. I thank you ever so much for everything.”

Brunhilde guided Hannelore and her retainers to a table where tea had already been served, while Gretia guided the apprentice scholars to the table where the tallying was being done.

“Lady Rozemyne, we have this from Lady Clarissa,” Gretia said upon her return, presenting me with a thick letter. “It is for Hartmut and describes yesterday’s ritual.”

I nodded. “Check its contents and then send it straight to Ehrenfest, if you would.”

“As you will.”

It wasn’t an urgent task by any means, but Gretia was clearly stressed about serving students from a top-ranking duchy like Dunkelfelger. I thought this would give her a chance to take a much-needed breather, and it seemed that I was right; a faint smile arose on her lips when she heard that I was giving her permission to leave.

“Now then,” came Philine’s voice, “allow me to explain how to do the tallying.”

Everyone was listening to her intently.

As we watched the apprentice scholars work, I sipped the tea that Brunhilde had poured for me and then bit into one of the cookies, demonstrating that they were safe for Hannelore to eat.

Philine was positively blazing through the answer sheets, working much faster than any of Dunkelfelger’s apprentice scholars. Clarissa was watching her all the while, wearing an amusing look of surprise.

“You are rather good at this, Philine,” Clarissa eventually said.

“I cannot even compare to Hartmut, but I did spend a lot of time training under Lord Ferdinand, so I have developed something of a talent for paperwork,” Philine replied with a proud giggle.

Clarissa made a face that seemed to betray her vexation, then said, “As one who will soon be Lady Rozemyne’s scholar, I cannot fall behind.” She then started on the tallying with a look of grave seriousness; her pride as the archscholar of a top-ranking duchy must have been challenged.

Hannelore forced a smile. “Had I known that Clarissa could be this focused, I might not have needed to come at all...”

To nobody’s surprise, Clarissa usually became uncontrollably excited when learning new information about me or getting the opportunity to participate in our joint research.

Hannelore continued, “Her excitement has been particularly

intense this year. At times, I even thought it might be part of an act—that perhaps she was emphasizing her position as your vassal so that she would not have to be separated from her fiancé in the temple. But no—what we see now is the real truth.” A dreamy smile arose on her face. “Her love is pure, and this is its unyielding strength.”

One of the attendants behind Hannelore sighed. “Milady, I do not imagine Clarissa is considering things that deeply...”

I agree. Clarissa is just like Hartmut; she didn't pick her partner based on love.

“That is what my attendant, Cordula, always says, Lady Rozemyne, but what do you think? I am of the opinion that one must be truly in love to stay up all night writing letters, even to the point of sleep deprivation.”

Royal Academy Love Stories contained a similar tale of a young apprentice scholar. To guarantee that her correspondence reached her fiancé, due to her duchy's situation, she had to give them directly to his lord; and to ensure that she never missed these opportunities, she would write long into the night, even after everyone else had gone to sleep. Hannelore had evidently fallen in love with this mindset.

“I pray with all my heart that Clarissa's affections are rewarded and that she is forever bound to her one true love,” Hannelore concluded.

It's cute that she's supporting them so innocently...

I couldn't be so blissfully naive, though—not when I'd found out how Clarissa first proposed to Hartmut. I certainly agreed that they were suitable for one another, but “true love” didn't even factor into it.

The attendant named Cordula moved a few sweets onto a plate and then poured some fresh tea for her lady. Hannelore sipped it calmly, then changed the subject.

“Ehrenfest's apprentice scholars truly are skilled. They aren't at all inferior to our own.”

“I thank you ever so much for your praise,” I said.

Philine wasn't the only one demonstrating her skills; Roderick and Leonore were doing an excellent job as well. Judithe and Muriella were fumbling a bit, since they still weren't used to the paperwork, but they were still putting up a good fight against Dunkelfelger's apprentice scholars, who were completely unaccustomed to this new tallying system.

“Um, though it does seem that some of your guard knights are among them as well...” Hannelore continued in a troubled voice. She had most likely recognized Judithe and Leonore, considering the frequency with which they accompanied me to tea parties.

“Indeed,” I said with a smile and a nod. “Our guard knights assist

with paperwork in the temple, so they are perfectly capable of assisting us here when the need arises. To my knowledge, Clarissa is an apprentice scholar who can perform the duties of a guard knight; perhaps it would be best to view this as a similar occurrence.”

“Similar to a scholar of the sword...” Hannelore muttered, uncertain. “A knight of the quill, then, perhaps?”

Clarissa had said that most Dunkelfelgerians wanted to be knights. As such, while the duchy had many scholars of the sword, there were no “knights of the quill,” as Hannelore had so aptly described it. The situation was quite the opposite among my retainers, with most of my guards also carrying out scholar work under Damuel.

“Lady Hannelore,” I said, “I wish to ask you a few questions about the ritual you performed yesterday.”

“What manner of questions?”

“Lord Lestilaut mentioned that the staff you used belonged to Verfuhrmeer the Goddess of Oceans. I must confess, it was my first time hearing of that particular divine instrument. Can you tell me more about it?”

“Our duchy’s archduke candidates see the aub present it during rituals, and we learn to make it ourselves. However, while we describe it as Verfuhrmeer’s divine instrument, I cannot say whether that is accurate. The spell we use to morph our schtappes is the same as the one taught in the knight course for creating normal staves.”

In short, like Lestilaut, she didn’t know much beyond that.

“I remember hearing the crashing of waves as you swung the staff, so I do believe it belongs to Verfuhrmeer,” I said. “Would it be right to say that Dunkelfelgerians have been morphing their schtappes without knowing that they are creating a divine instrument?”

“By ‘the crashing of waves,’ are you referring to the abrupt sound that started during the ritual...?” Hannelore asked. “It was my first time hearing it, and I was unsure what it was at the time, but do you mean to say it has a connection to the Goddess of Oceans? Dunkelfelger is a landlocked duchy, so I must express my doubts...”

According to Hannelore, on no other occasion had the ritual returned any blessings, and what I had interpreted as the sound of waves was to her a bizarre and unpleasant noise. She wanted to know the reason for this strange occurrence more than anyone.

“Lady Hannelore, could you perhaps repeat what you said at the time?” I asked. “I might be able to deduce which god you were praying to.”

“Certainly.”

Hearing the prayer only confirmed my suspicions: the ritual was for offering mana to the Goddess of Oceans.

“There was information about this ritual on one of the ivory slates

in the underground archive we visited the other day,” I said. “Its purpose is to dispel extreme heat, but given what happened yesterday, we can conclude that the mana offered also provides a calming effect. Perhaps its ‘cooling’ properties apply to more than just actual temperatures.”

Could we have used this ritual to steal a riesefalke egg without the risk of Mount Lohenberg erupting? As I pondered that question, Hannelore muttered about wanting to go back to the archive to check that slate. She considered this a matter of great importance, as the distinction would confirm whether the ritual purely removed blessings or whether it could use mana to calm the excitement of all those within a certain area.

“Still, to think there are divine instruments that even you do not know about, Lady Rozemyne... You can deduce whom a ritual is for just by reading its prayer, so I thought you knew everything about the gods.”

“I am familiar only with the information found in the bible. Most of my knowledge is about the two supreme gods and the Eternal Five, who are worshipped in the chapel, and Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom, whom I personally admire. With all that said, the extent of my understanding is that the first king received a Grutrisheit from her.”

There were a ton of subordinate gods, but the bible didn’t list their divine instruments or anything like that. Instead, it focused on the two supreme gods and the five primary gods.

“In that case, perhaps you will learn something new from the Dunkelfelger book I decided to bring to this bookworm tea party,” Hannelore said with a small, happy smile. “It is an old collection of stories about gods not discussed in the bible. Some of them may have been added by later generations without oversight, but there is also one about Mestionora. I expect that someone as well informed on divine matters as you will enjoy them.”

“Why, I greatly look forward to it.”

My excitement was through the roof. I would read any and all books that were bestowed upon me!

“Lady Rozemyne, the tallying is done,” Philine announced as she handed me the results. A quick look revealed that the apprentice knights who had earned divine protections were overwhelmingly from Dunkelfelger, and most of said protections were from fighting-type gods.

“So, each year, only a few students receive none at all...” I commented. “This explains why Dunkelfelger receives special treatment from the professors during the ceremony for obtaining divine protections.”

Here in the Royal Academy, news of a student from Dunkelfelger receiving multiple divine protections or the divine protection of a god whose element they did not possess was considered anything but interesting. Ehrenfest had received so much attention for accomplishing the unexpected, but it seemed strange to me that nobody had looked into the duchy where this was a regular occurrence before now.

Though I suppose any attempts to investigate would soon deteriorate into nonstop ditter talk.

Ditter was an essential part of our joint research; perhaps the other duchies had chosen not to broach the subject because they knew what it would entail.

“That said, I wonder how many apprentice scholars and attendants receive divine protections...” I muttered. It had only been intended as a passing remark, but Hannelore actually replied.

“Our scholars of the sword and attendants receive divine protections as well, so, um... I expect we contribute to the total number more than any other duchy.”

Now I wanted to know even more about Dunkelfelger’s internal affairs. Just how many of their scholars and attendants had divine protections from fighting-type gods?

“I wish to research your apprentice scholars and attendants as well,” I said. “Clarissa, could you conduct the questionnaire and send the results to me?”

“Ah, is this a job for me specifically? Understood. I will pour my heart and soul into this task so that I may be of even the slightest use to you,” Clarissa declared, clenching her fists gleefully. I told Roderick to give her the papers she would need.

“Looking at the results here, the apprentice knights of other duchies really did not receive many divine protections,” I observed. “And seventy percent of those who did are from Dunkelfelger.” This was an enormous disparity, even when one accounted for Dunkelfelger being a greater duchy with more apprentice knights than average.

Incidentally, not a single person from Ehrenfest had received the divine protection of a fighting-type god. I could only assume this was because the apprentice knights hadn’t taken the song and dance seriously—which was understandable, as they hadn’t understood their purpose—and because my blessings had stripped them of their need to pray to the gods.

In effect, all those blessings I gave were akin to me babying them. That’s no good.

I needed to have the apprentice knights pray more so that they could obtain divine protections through their own power. They could

learn a lot from Philine, who had even obtained protections outside her elements.

“Um, Lady Rozemyne... we have not been offering our mana when performing the ritual...” Hannelore said. “Should we have still received protections for it?”

Their most recent performance had returned significant blessings because of all the mana I’d donated through Leidenschaft’s spear, but that wasn’t what happened normally. Those from Dunkelfelger hadn’t offered their mana during the ritual, and no blessings had rained down on them after it.

“The ritual is essentially a large-scale prayer,” I said, “and you were using a schtappe transformed into a spear, so perhaps some mana was provided inadvertently. This seems even more likely when you consider that the divine protections most Dunkelfelgerians receive are from the gods named in the prayer.” It was entirely possible that they had been making offerings to the gods even without the expected blessings to prove it.

“Furthermore,” I continued, “as the rituals are performed before and after dinner, it may be that playing more often makes one more likely to receive the divine protections. This data here shows that the apprentice knights who obtained protections from multiple subordinates also participated in many games.”

My conclusions weren’t immediately apparent from the numerical results we’d gathered, so we would probably want to make a graph of some sort for when it came time for our presentation. As I considered which was the best way to display our data, Hannelore spoke up timidly.

“Lady Rozemyne... last night, we were discussing whether even Dunkelfelger could obtain those blessings if we were to transform our schtappes into Leidenschaft’s spear.”

In the Ehrenfest Dormitory, we had spent our time seriously contemplating the best ways to stop my rampages and to keep the greater duchy from asking anything of us. In the Dunkelfelger Dormitory, however, their greatest concern had been returning the ritual to its proper, original state. I could understand why they had taken such an interest in the matter; the performance they had so recently seen had ended up being very blatantly different from what they were used to.

“I expect you will be able to recreate the divine instruments by touching the real ones and channeling your mana into them until you can clearly visualize them in your mind,” I said. “My retainers were able to do this at our temple. I should note, however, that the process uses a surprising amount of mana. I would assume that only archnobles and above will be capable of maintaining the divine

instrument all throughout the ritual, and those who offer their mana during the performance will not be left with enough to play.”

Hannelore and her retainers nodded, unfazed. Dunkelfelger’s nobles were prepared to venture even into the temple if doing so would secure them blessings for their ditler games. Each duchy had its own standards and perspectives, so it was hard to predict these things.

That said, I’m pretty sure the real spear from the temple would suffice as long as you offered up enough mana; no need to make one from your schtappe.

I decided to keep that thought to myself. I wanted them to help change public opinion of the temple, and what better way than to have them start going to their own temple and improving the conditions there?

“The blessing changes depending on how much mana is offered, so if you desire many blessings, then you will need a great deal of mana,” I said. “Rather than having one person try to shoulder that burden alone, I believe it would be best for a large group to provide their mana collaboratively. The prayers in the temple are for the benefit not of oneself but of others, so no matter how much mana a person offers, they will personally receive nothing in return.”

Hannelore stared at me with wide eyes. “In that case, Lady Rozemyne... you provided that much mana, and yet...”

“Indeed. I did not receive a blessing from yesterday’s ritual. That is why I was able to move without issue while the apprentice knights were falling over themselves.”

It seemed to me that the ritual was intended not for one person, but for a group of people, who would contribute their mana in small bits to form a large collective whole. Hannelore seemed to agree with that.

“However,” I continued, “do take care if you perform the ritual with any laynobles present. There is a chance that they might lose so much mana that they collapse.”

“Pardon?”

“Having several people perform a ritual in tandem allows their mana to flow more freely. Thus, if there is too wide of a gap in their mana capacities, then those with less to give will soon end up in danger. I understand that your duchy is bold enough to leap straight into doing things, but do be careful.”

Dunkelfelger would try basically anything for the sake of ditler. It was crucial that I give them these warnings now; otherwise, they were going to end up in too much of a state to even play.

“I am aware that, in the past, the ritual was performed the day before a ditler game rather than on the day of,” Hannelore said. “Could there perhaps be a reason for that?”

“I would assume it was so that those due to play had time to recover their mana or to grow accustomed to the blessings. Either way, I am sure there was a good reason. Small changes can lead to massive alterations over time; I would advise that you carefully research the ritual so that the custom you have preserved for so long does not collapse.”

“We thank you ever so much for your advice,” she said with a nod, a pleasant smile on her face. “We will take great care.”

Once our meeting was over and the Dunkelfelgerians had taken their leave, we returned to the common room.

The next task on my to-do list was turning the data we had collected into graphs while teaching Philine and the others how to do the same. As expected, I was more fond of working than I was of sitting around discussing things. It didn’t feel like I was actually involved in the research when I wasn’t physically doing anything.

It wasn’t long before we had all of our findings neatly arranged. I marveled at our work, satisfied with how much easier the information was to interpret—and it was then that other apprentice scholars started coming over and asking what we had made. It seemed that documents with graphs weren’t yet a thing here in the Royal Academy.

“Rozemyne, won’t that cause a fuss during the Interduchy Tournament?” Wilfried asked.

“I would hope so. Besides, isn’t our joint research causing a fuss already?”

Despite my response, I suddenly began to feel uneasy. As much as I preferred our data with graphs, I decided to write to Ferdinand and get his opinion first.

Frustrating Tea Parties

After arriving at Hirschur's laboratory, I gave Raimund my letter for Ferdinand and then got to work making new prototype magic tools.

Right now, Raimund was researching a magic tool that would shine various lights when a certain time came. It would project colors onto the pages of books so that even the most obsessive reader would stare up in surprise, offering the perfect opportunity for someone to snatch the book from their hands and end their reading time.

I'd wanted to prioritize making a tool that would automatically return books to their respective shelves, but my attendants had fervently disagreed; according to them, my library would absolutely need one of these light-shining magic tools.

"Research the light-shining magic tool first," Hirschur said. "Then you can research the magic tool for returning books."

"Is that your assessment, Professor Hirschur?" Raimund asked. "I couldn't agree more."

They both immediately concurred with my attendants, since they were the ones preparing their meals.

I can understand having a weakness for delicious food, but at least try to disguise it! Besides, I'm the one who gets them to make all those meals for you! Hmph!

"Well, I must be off," Raimund said. "I need to go to the library to research the light magic tool."

"I should go as well," I added. "That way, I can ask Schwartz and Weiss about the docu—"

"Raimund is more than capable of asking on your behalf, milady. Anyway, has the royal family not forbidden you from visiting the library? If you wish to read books, we may return to your room."

Bwehhh... I wanna go toooo...

I slumped my shoulders; being told that I couldn't go somewhere just made me want to go there even more. Sure, there were enough books in my room to keep me occupied for now... but the moment I finished them, my inability to visit the library would really start wearing me down.

"Lady Rozemyne, were you not going to deliver these documents to Professor Hirschur?" Lieseleta asked, handing me a stack of papers. It was a transcription of all the research on Schwartz and Weiss.

“Professor Hirschur, this is research left behind by someone who studied Schwartz and Weiss in the past,” I said. “You may only borrow it, so transcribe whatever you wish to keep. I intend to show this to Ferdinand eventually, so I cannot let you have it permanently.”

“Where did you find these documents? I do not recall them being on the library’s second floor.”

“They were in a closed-stack archive, I am told. Professor Solange lent them to me.”

Hirschur looked over the papers and then blinked. “Oh, yes... I often send my disciples to seek documents, but I have never consulted Solange myself. Just how many documents are in this closed-stack archive?”

“Well, it contains material so valuable that it must be preserved with magic tools. Professor Solange was previously unable to confirm its actual contents, but that has changed now that Schwartz and Weiss are moving again and the new archlibrarian is providing additional mana. You should go talk to her.”

The library had been suffering from a serious mana shortage back when Solange was the only one protecting it, which had meant she was unable to supply the closed-stack archive with the mana it needed. Many of the documents had started to deteriorate as a result. Hortensia now had her hands full trying to ensure that everything was adequately supplied; keeping Schwartz and Weiss operational wasn’t enough.

So, in other words, the library still needs more mana.

“Lady Rozemyne, you say that you plan to deliver these papers to Ferdinand, but surely he is in no position to be doing research.”

“At present, he has neither a room nor a hidden room, meaning he has nowhere to do any research. However, as he wrote in his letter that he wishes to do some nonetheless, I thought it best to preserve some documents for him.”

Once he *did* eventually receive a hidden room, my first course of action was going to be to cram Lessy full of documents, tools, and materials, then head straight to Ahrensbach’s castle.

Though I doubt Aub Ahrensbach will permit me to fly over in my highbeast, so that will remain but a dream.

“Those who move to other duchies remain in guest rooms until they are officially married,” I continued. “Ferdinand, however, was sent over much sooner than usual. He will surely suffocate without somewhere to retreat to. If only there were something we could do for him...”

In my eyes, we were both expressing our worry for Ferdinand, but Hirschur seemed to recover in a heartbeat. “I shall carry out research in his place and strive to do it every single day in his honor,” she said,

completely unfazed. “Perhaps you should return to your dormitory and read, Lady Rozemyne. If you have any other useful documents, do bring them over. Oh, and you would do well to send a report to Fraularm sooner rather than later.”

Wha...? Come on, let's talk about Ferdinand for a little while longer.

Hirschur began transcribing the documents, determined not to back down. There was little else for me to do until Raimund finished his schematics—I couldn't make any prototypes without them—so I resigned myself to returning to my room and reading. I wanted to finish the books I was currently borrowing so that I could take out even more.

As I whiled away the time reading in my room, invitations for tea parties started to trickle in. The Royal Academy's socializing season was finally beginning. My attendants consulted Charlotte's and formed our plans; the two of us were going to be attending together.

At the same time, I arranged for a meeting with Fraularm. As per Hirschur's instructions, I needed to give her a second report on the state of our research and point out that the first report for Ferdinand had not been delivered.

Fraularm must have taken a personal interest in the progress of our joint research; unlike when I was trying to schedule my exam with her, she agreed to see me pretty much instantly.

As soon as I arrived to meet Fraularm, she extended a hand to me, requesting my report. She was wearing gloves and made no attempt to read the letter then and there. In truth, she was acting like Ferdinand did when on guard against an attempted poisoning.

“Professor Fraularm... it seems that the first report has still not reached Ferdinand,” I said. “Have you sent it to Ahrensbach yet?”

“Is that so?” she replied, deliberately avoiding my gaze. “Our scholars must be slacking. I certainly did send it.”

I put a hand on my cheek and sighed. “In that case, I may need to consult Lady Detlinde. Such apathy from the scholars of a greater duchy is quite troubling indeed. It must be especially troublesome for you, as someone who specializes in collecting and organizing intelligence.”

“Indeed. Quite troublesome...” Fraularm said, glancing my way with a fake smile plastered on her face. “Incidentally, Lady Rozemyne... through what means are you keeping in contact with Lord Ferdinand...?”

“He is my guardian; it is only natural that I would have various means of communicating with him. Revealing any more than that would be like giving Schutzaria's shield to Leidenschaft, no?”

Fraularm huffed and then turned away from me sharply—an unsurprising reaction considering that I had more or less said, “You don’t need to know that. Just what are you trying to pull?”

“On a more important note,” I continued, moving the conversation along, “do you know when Lady Detlinde will be finishing her classes?”

“Now *that* is what I would call giving Schutzaria’s shield to Leidenschaft,” she retorted.

“You *are* aware that I need to schedule a cousins’ tea party with her and deliver her hairpins, correct...? And, as you should also know, I am busy with joint research, and my schedule is becoming increasingly packed with plans for other tea parties. As such, I would consider my question to be nothing but reasonable. That said, if you are insistent on keeping quiet, then please inform Lady Detlinde that I will have my attendants deliver the hairpins some other time.”

My attendants only had a brief opportunity to socialize this year, and they were striving to do as much as they could in that time. I’d been focused on my books when they were coming to me with requests, so I’d absentmindedly agreed to everything that was put before me. As a result, my schedule was now completely packed.

Truth be told, I much preferred the idea of reading more books to attending tea parties, but I needed to socialize with as many duchies as possible; my aim was to improve the horrible reputation that was plaguing both Sylvester and Ehrenfest as a whole. In that regard, I was fully on board with delaying a tea party with Ahrensbach, a duchy that was bound to spread negative rumors about us anyway.

I was willing to attend the cousins’ tea party, since I’m curious about how Ferdinand is doing in Ahrensbach, but I can’t say I’m too enthusiastic about it.

“Sister, we are receiving so many invitations to tea parties,” Charlotte informed me upon my return to the dormitory. “Which will you attend?”

“There are more?” I asked, taking the invitations she had extended to me. I was already due to attend so many, and the thought of sitting through even more—and surrendering even more of my reading time—was especially annoying.

Charlotte gave me a consoling smile. “Socializing season has just properly begun. Almost all duchies know from their dormitory supervisors that you are busy with your joint research projects, so they must want to secure a meeting with you as early as they can.”

That made sense; after all, as the Interduchy Tournament grew nearer and nearer, everybody would end up too busy with their research to attend tea parties.

“Furthermore,” Brunhilde added with a smile, “this is the first time you have not needed to return home for the Dedication Ritual.”

“I don’t think I’m physically capable of socializing every day...” I said. “I’ll probably end up sick.”

Although I was getting healthier, biting off more than I could chew would be dangerous. If we didn’t set aside at least two days of reading for each day of tea parties, then I would probably collapse out of the blue and at a terribly inconvenient moment.

“Indeed,” Brunhilde replied. “We do not know when a summons might come from Dunkelfelger or the royal family, so we cannot pack our schedule too tightly.”

Together, my attendants and I continued this conversation while gradually working out how to allocate our time. We were interrupted only when an ordonnanz flew into the room.

“This is Detlinde of Ahrensbach,” the bird said. “I, too, have very little time in my schedule. Let us have our tea party four days from now, in the afternoon.”

In other words, Fraulärm had passed along our message. I wasn’t particularly happy about Detlinde setting a date for our tea party without speaking to my attendants or checking when I was free.

“I... can’t refuse this, can I?”

“This was at your request, was it not, Sister?” Charlotte asked. “I will inform Wilfried that a date has been decided.”

“Maybe, but this wasn’t my intention...” I sighed. My only option was to adjust my schedule accordingly and then give Detlinde my acknowledgment.

Today, I was going to be attending tea parties with bottom-ranking duchies, but not with Charlotte; Ahrensbach’s inconsiderate actions had required us to make a few changes to our schedule. Given that Ehrenfest had taken a neutral stance during the civil war, some bottom-ranking duchies apparently thought it would be easier to kiss up to us than to the faction that had come out victorious.

According to Charlotte, we wanted to bring as many bottom-ranking duchies under our wing as was feasible. The problem was that I wasn’t sure how to go about doing this. Ehrenfest was in the midst of reshaping its interduchy relations, and Charlotte didn’t know enough about the subject to teach me anything of use. This was one of numerous problems that had arisen from our sudden rise through the duchy rankings.

“Lady Rozemyne, famous Saint of Ehrenfest. We have long awaited this opportunity to speak with you.”

For the most part, every tea party we attended started with the other duchy singing Ehrenfest’s praises. They commended our sweets

and paid especially close attention to Rosina's music, which they asked to hear more of. I even noticed their musicians straining their ears as they desperately attempted to memorize what they could.

Some books were exchanged as well.

"I was not able to bring a book last year, since everything happened so suddenly, but this year, I received permission from the aub ahead of time..." the representative of the other duchy explained.

Naturally, I wanted to be on good terms with any duchy that was willing to lend me books. I accepted their generous offer with a smile, then lent them some Ehrenfest books in return. As it turned out, they were particularly excited to read them, as our books were now popular among the top-ranking duchies.

As expected, it's best to establish our trends at the very top and then let them trickle down. By doing this, reading will spread even further.

Unfortunately, my sincere interest lasted only as long as our conversation about books. The bottom-ranking duchies were very, very curious about how we had climbed the ranks, and once they began their legitimately obstinate barrage of questions, I was forced to put on a fake smile.

"It was just so sudden," someone remarked. "Is there some secret technique that Ehrenfest used to climb so far up the ranks in just a number of years?"

"To think you are balancing three joint research projects with greater duchies..." the representative continued. "You truly are exceptional, Lady Rozemyne. Not only are you responsible for many trends and in charge of several research projects, but you have also proven that you are kindhearted enough to continue serving as High Bishop even after being adopted. I must kneel before the astute eyes of Aub Ehrenfest, who identified your talents and adopted you."

"Everyone says that Aub Ehrenfest is a cruel archduke who forces all archduke candidates other than his own children into the temple. How tragic."

Each time someone bad-mouthed Sylvester, I disputed whatever rumor they were repeating and clarified that *all* of our archduke candidates passed through the farming villages for Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival. No matter how much I argued my case, however, nobody believed me. Bizarrely enough, they would always reply with something like "You truly are kind to protect him like that."

But I'm not. It's all true. Are you even listening to me?!

Over and over again, Sylvester was insulted, Wilfried and Charlotte were indirectly accused of having easy lives, and I was upheld as a profound saint—the lone jewel of an otherwise cruel family. I continued to speak out against such ideas, but I might as well have been reasoning with a brick wall, and the tea party ended with

me feeling in a worse mood than when I'd entered.

I'm just glad that I made it through without unleashing an indiscriminate "kill everything" Crushing wave. I really did a good job keeping myself under control.

I returned to my room, and we gathered together to reflect on our most recent tea party. "Am I the only one who has to endure listening to such malicious words?" I asked, looking at my attendants who had attended the tea party with me. "Do they say the same to Charlotte's face, I wonder?"

Brunhilde shook her head. "They would not dare mention such rumors to the aub's own children. I expect they feel comfortable saying them to you as they are hoping to get on your good side, as you are an adopted daughter, and many believe you are being abused." Her voice was noticeably harsher than usual, and although both she and Rihyarda were smiling at me, I could tell that they had been equally frustrated by the tea parties.

"The aub and his children by blood were not the only ones being treated with such contempt," came a voice. "It may have seemed that they were idolizing you, Lady Rozemyne, but even those 'heralding' you as a saint were being backhanded."

"Gretia?"

"They called you a saint to emphasize that you were raised in the temple. They mocked you for protecting the aub, insinuating that you were merely blind to the worse treatment you receive, and proclaimed you to be a very convenient and freely available source of mana."

My initial thought was that Gretia was being too negative in her evaluation, but she had felt strongly enough to speak up instead of maintaining her usual silence. It seemed wise to take her input seriously.

"You are most likely being viewed as a quiet, weak-minded saint who exists only as a puppet for her guardians," Gretia continued. "You will need to consider the risk of someone trying to extort or even kidnap you."

"Understood," responded not I, but Leonore.

After our reflection, we spoke more about how people bad-mouthed the aub's biological children behind their backs. As I understood it, Charlotte and I were deliberately being made to attend tea parties separately to lure the duchies hosting us into a false sense of security. I was well aware that getting such duchies to expose their maliciousness was a righteous cause, but I was finding it miserable having to say, "You are all very kind, but Aub Ehrenfest is not that kind of man" over and over and *over* again.

I vented my frustrations while taking a short reading break, then

had to attend even more frustrating tea parties. If someone had warned me that this was going to be my fate, then I would have rather missed socializing season entirely.

Guhhh... I wish they had summoned me back to the temple this year.

As my misery continued, it came time for Detlinde's tea party for cousins. I was well aware that I needed to attend whether I wanted to or not, but in my current state, I was really starting to doubt that I would be able to bless her marriage to Ferdinand. It was going to take my utmost concentration to not accidentally say, "Gimme back my precious brain!"

"Matthias, Laurenz, Muriella, and Gretia will sit this one out," I said. "It would not be wise to reveal that several children from the former Veronica faction have become my retainers all at once."

"Indeed. We do not know how much Ahrensbach knows about the purge. Hiding what we can is certainly wise."

How much information would we give, and how much would we keep to ourselves? Those were the questions I discussed with Wilfried and Charlotte.

Okay, Rozemyne. No matter how annoyed you get, don't let it show on your face. Keep things peaceful so that Ferdinand doesn't suffer more in Ahrensbach.

After carving this holy oath into my heart, I made my way to the Ahrensbach tea party alongside my two siblings.

"Good day, everyone."

"Good day, Lady Detlinde," Wilfried replied, greeting her as our representative. "Thank you ever so much for inviting us."

We were promptly directed to our seats. Meanwhile, Detlinde was looking notably pleased. She saw our attendants handing over packages, smiled, and asked whether they were her hairpins.

"Today, my musician will be playing a new Ahrensbach piece," Detlinde announced. "It is a love song that Lord Ferdinand composed for me, dedicated to Geduldh." After giving a dainty laugh and stroking her gorgeous blonde hair, she then turned to her musician, who nodded in response and started to play. It was the same song about nostalgia that I'd previously heard in music class—and it seemed that I wasn't the only one connecting the dots.

"We heard this in music class," Wilfried remarked.

"Indeed," Detlinde said pridefully. "I got all of our musically talented students to learn it so that word of its origins would spread. Lord Ferdinand gave me this wonderful gift during the feast marking the start of winter, so they did not have long to practice. I am sure it was quite a struggle for them."

Detlinde went on to sip her tea and take demonstrative bites of

the prepared sweets. We tried them for ourselves soon after, which elicited an excited smile from our host.

“So,” she continued, “is it after our spring Starbinding that Lord Ferdinand’s personal chefs are coming to Ahrensbach?”

Excuse me? I don’t think that was ever in the cards.

The chefs who had previously worked for Ferdinand in the temple were now working for Hartmut. I was in no position to discuss the movements of other people’s personnel, so there was nothing I could say in response. Maybe I would need to send a cautionary letter...

Detlinde gave a satisfied sigh and then set down her cup. “I was initially depressed about being engaged to Lord Ferdinand... but as of late, I have been feeling a little more optimistic about our union.”

“You were depressed...?” I asked.

“But of course. I am going to be the next archduchess of Ahrensbach, yet my father chose to pair me with a much older man from a much lower-ranking duchy—a man who has no mother and was sent to Ehrenfest’s temple. My disappointment was only natural.”

I was more surprised than I was annoyed. To me, Ferdinand was an excellent archduke candidate who had come first-in-class each year he attended the Royal Academy, all the while being a creative mad scientist who could do anything from scholar work, to knight work, to serving as the representative of an aub. However, to those who weren’t from Ehrenfest and thus hadn’t seen all the work he’d done, and those who hadn’t been at the Royal Academy to witness his great feats, he was apparently a terrible pick.

I guess that’s just how he looks from the outside...

“I was quite relieved when I met him in person and saw his kind personality and intelligence for myself,” Detlinde continued. “He did vow to dedicate himself to me, after all.”

I assume she thinks he’s “kind” because she fell victim to his fake smile? I mean, this misunderstanding is exactly what we want, but at the same time... I really want her to know that he’s playing her like a fiddle.

Of course, this deception had made her more optimistic about marrying Ferdinand, so I silenced the mischievous voice in my head and instead started promoting his competence.

“There remain countless legends about his accomplishments in the Royal Academy. For example—”

“Yes, I know of them already. I gathered intelligence to find out more about his true nature and was very surprised. Given his many accomplishments, I see no reason why he cannot stand by my side as my husband.”

Now I was annoyed.

He’s the amazing one here! The question should be whether you are worthy of standing beside him!

Again, I swallowed my words. Today was turning out to be the ultimate test of patience.

Having noticed my internal struggle and fake smile, Charlotte leaned into the conversation and promptly moved things along. “If you were initially depressed about your engagement, Lady Detlinde, then was your heart perhaps set on another? I remember a similar tale in *Royal Academy Love Stories*. If you have any particularly affectionate memories, then I would be delighted to hear about them.”

Detlinde blinked a few times before averting her gaze, her dark-green eyes downcast. “Yes, of course it was. The man even returned my affections, but I am the next archduchess; I have no choice but to marry the man whom my father chose for me. No matter how wondrous that past flame may have been, no matter how desperately he conveyed his feelings to me, I cannot give my hand to someone who does not suit me. I understood this even back then... but our parting was still so very painful. Oh, how I loathed Liebeskhilfe the Goddess of Binding for having brought us together, knowing that we were destined to be separated.”

There was now a vacant look in Detlinde’s eyes; her thoughts had presumably wandered to her past lover. The two had apparently said their farewells during the summer, so this mystery man must have been an Ahrensbach noble rather than someone from the Royal Academy.

I guess this engagement has been hard for her too.

I’d assumed that Detlinde had everything to gain from her upcoming marriage, since she hadn’t settled on an escort, and there hadn’t been any rumors circulating through the Academy about her being romantically involved with someone. In reality, despite what everyone else thought, this engagement wasn’t desired by either participant. I couldn’t help but sigh at how cruel the world could be.

“Thus, partially for the sake of my lost love, I must become an excellent aub,” Detlinde concluded, making her resolve clear.

I was slightly moved, but also suddenly worried; her repeated assertions about becoming the next aub suggested that the current Aub Ahrensbach’s condition was far from stable. I decided to broach the matter.

“Speaking of which, how fares Aub Ahrensbach’s health? I was worried when Ferdinand was asked to move to Ahrensbach so suddenly.”

Ferdinand would most likely be able to sustain him with potions, but it was unlikely that Ahrensbach would trust the concoctions of another duchy. He wasn’t even describing the aub’s health in his letters to me, so I was concerned about whether the handover had gone smoothly.

Detlinde heaved a tragic sigh. “He certainly cannot be described as ‘well.’ Thankfully, Lord Ferdinand has made reasonable progress with his administrative work, so I would assume he is at peace.”

“I see...”

For her to be describing the aub as sickly here at a tea party, he must have been extremely unwell indeed. Ehrenfest already knew this from Ferdinand’s sudden departure, but from what I understood, no other duchies were aware. At the very least, it wasn’t spoken about in the Royal Academy.

“I wished to return to Ahrensbach immediately, but Mother has said that, as the next aub, I must focus on socializing...” Detlinde continued. It was only natural that she would want to rush to the side of an ill family member. Still, despite all the stress she must have been dealing with, she had somehow managed to contain those feelings, focus on her classes, and put effort into socializing. Maybe I would need to reevaluate my opinion of her a little.

Personally, if someone had told me that my dad was unwell, I would have rushed through my classes and headed straight back to Ehrenfest, where I would have stayed at his bedside no matter what he said.

“Thus, during this year’s graduation ceremony, I must carry myself in a manner befitting the next Aub Ahrensbach.”

“I wish you well in your efforts.”

“That said, do you not think it Ehrenfest’s duty to assist me with captivating my audience?”

“Um... Assist you how?” I asked, blinking. I could tell that Detlinde viewed her request as being very straightforward, but I didn’t have a clue what she was talking about. I turned to Wilfried and Charlotte, but they were just as uncertain.

Irritated by our confusion, Detlinde continued in a sharper tone: “I am asking that you teach me how to make my feystones shine when I dance. That was how you drew so much attention to yourself during whirling class, was it not? Personally, I considered it a gaudy and perhaps even needy display, but I cannot deny its effectiveness. Will such theatrics not be essential to my performance as the Goddess of Light during this year’s dedication whirl, hm?”

I was stunned silent, barely able to comprehend what she had just said.

Uh, what? If you attempt something like that, then forget the Goddess of Light; you’re going to be more like the Goddess of Neon Lamps! I mean, you’ll end up being so overly flashy! It might get you a lot of attention, sure, but I don’t think any of it will be positive.

Wilfried and Charlotte were wearing similar looks of disbelief.

“Lady Detlinde,” Wilfried said, “if you saw Rozemyne practice,

then I think you would understand that what you are suggesting will make you stand out for all the wrong reasons. I do not believe you should do something like that at your graduation, in the presence of the royal family and other aubs.”

“Oh my. Wilfried... will you really not help me in my time of need...?” Detlinde asked, feigning surprise. Even then, her exaggerated display was nothing compared to what the rest of us were feeling. Did she really intend to turn herself into a whirling glow stick?

“I do not believe that is the issue here...” I said.

“Oh? Do you not wish to teach me?” Detlinde asked, fixing me with a glare. “Are you so against the idea of sharing the spotlight?”

“No, that is not what I meant... If you wish to make your feystones shine, then you need only fill them with mana, no?”

“I will not be fooled so easily. There must be some method you used to make so many shine at once. You relied on a magic tool of some sort, I presume.”

Uh... no.

Detlinde went on to describe how the many rainbow feystones of my hair stick had started to shine and said that such a thing could not possibly have happened just from me channeling mana into them. We would need to either masterfully change the subject or outright deceive her.

I was trying to figure out what to say when Charlotte suddenly leaned forward and said in a low voice, “Lady Detlinde, please keep what I am about to tell you to yourself.”

Detlinde similarly leaned closer, her eyes sparkling. “I knew there was a secret.”

“The truth is, on the day of that unusual display, my sister was exceptionally ill. She could not keep her mana under control. Thus, the feystones truly were filled naturally; there was no magic tool that made them shine.”

“So, she collapsed after whirling because...”

“Because she had not been able to keep her mana from flowing out, yes.”

That wasn’t a lie, but it sure felt like one. Charlotte was making it sound as though I had some kind of terrible disease.

Detlinde gave both Charlotte and me a suspicious look, indicating that she wasn’t convinced.

Wilfried must have assumed this was a good moment for him to step in, as he nodded and said, “That’s why Rozemyne wouldn’t be able to make her feystones shine now even if she wanted to; she’s all better. You know, if you really are set on doing it yourself, then why not get some cheap feystones that can’t hold much mana?”

What are you doing?! Are you trying to turn her into the Goddess of

Neon Lamps?!

Charlotte and I instinctively looked at one another. We were both concerned, but Wilfried was just doing his best to help her with the knowledge he had.

“This introduces the risk that they might turn to gold dust if you pour too much mana into them,” he said, unmistakably serious, “but they’ll shine more easily.”

“A splendid idea,” Detlinde said, clapping her hands together.

Aaaaaah! She’s actually going to do it?!

“It will require a great deal of mana to make even feystones of a lower quality light up like that...” Charlotte said, trying to appeal to Detlinde’s better judgment. “I do not believe there is any need to use so much for the dedication whirl.”

Detlinde smiled and shook her head. “Fear not; I will practice ahead of time so that I can determine the lowest quality that does not turn into gold dust. Oh, and may I see the hairpins I will be wearing for my graduation ceremony?” she asked cheerfully.

Wilfried’s attendant got straight to work—and after various checks, Detlinde’s apprentice attendant, Martina, accepted the box.

“I intend to debut these at a tea party consisting only of top-ranking duchies,” Detlinde said.

“In that case, we will need to show your attendants how they are worn,” I replied. “Brunhilde.”

After responding with a brisk nod, Brunhilde started teaching Martina, having been through this process countless times before with Eglantine’s and Adolphine’s attendants, among others.

“Still, Lady Rozemyne—your rainbow feystones truly are wonderful,” Detlinde remarked. “Should I ask my fiancé for a similar ornament, I wonder?”

“I am sure he would be willing to make one for you after your Starbind Ceremony.”

“Oh my. Only after?”

I took this opportunity to complain about a matter of great importance to me.

“Well, as Ferdinand is staying in a guest room until then, he has no workshop, no ingredients, and no tools with which to work. There is nothing he can do. Ideally, he would at least have a workshop for doing research, but...”

“Ah. There is no helping it, then.”

I had hoped that the allure of a rainbow feystone ornament would encourage her to prepare a workshop at once, but her response hadn’t sounded very positive. How unfortunate.

“Speaking of research,” Detlinde continued, “how is your project with Ahrensbach faring? I must say, I am disappointed that you have

yet to send us a single report.”

“I delivered my second report to Professor Fraularm several days ago,” I said, turning to Wilfried and Charlotte for support. They both nodded, confirming that I was speaking the truth. “She assured me that she sent the first to Ahrensbach, but has she really not said a word to you? That is an unusual way to treat one’s archduke candidates...”

“To think she would send them to Ahrensbach without showing them to me first...”

“It also seems that my first report never reached Ferdinand. I struggle to believe that a greater duchy such as Ahrensbach has any inattentive scholars, but I would be very appreciative if you could investigate the matter as the next aub.” I made sure to add that it was possible this was all a huge misunderstanding.

Detlinde gave a firm nod and said, “I shall do just that. This research is being advertised as that of Lord Ferdinand’s disciples, and anything that impacts my fiancé’s reputation impacts my own as well. I would rather his name not be sullied through this project of yours.”

“To ensure that we meet his standards, Raimund is constantly sending him letters and reports,” I replied. “We will only be presenting that which receives his direct approval.”

“Yes, you do that.”

Her phrasing is really getting on my nerves... but this might resolve our report incident, and it gives me an excuse to contact Ferdinand more frequently. All’s well that ends well, I suppose...

As I was feeling satisfied with our unexpected progress, Wilfried spoke with Detlinde. “Uncle went to Ahrensbach as Lady Letizia’s instructor, but how has that been going?” he asked, eyeing her and her retainers carefully. “He, um... has a tendency to be quite harsh when educating others, so I am a bit worried.”

I could tell that Wilfried was actually trying to find out whether Detlinde knew about Letizia and the royal decree. Her retainers tensed up a little, but Detlinde herself merely rested a troubled hand on her cheek.

“I do not socialize with Letizia much,” she said, “so I could not tell you much about her. I departed for the Royal Academy as soon as winter socializing began, but according to the letters I’ve received, Lord Ferdinand is working rather hard on his administrative duties. Surely he has no time to be teaching some child.”

This pretty much confirmed it: Detlinde was completely blind to the significance of Ferdinand moving to Ahrensbach to teach Letizia. She didn’t realize that she was only a temporary, interim aub—and, upon sensing this, Wilfried gave her a sympathetic look.

“More importantly, look at this,” Detlinde continued, redirecting

the focus of our conversation. “It was a gift given to me by someone from Lanzenave who visited Ahrensbach during the summer.”

What followed was a slurry of uninteresting chatter as Detlinde bragged about her duchy, her fiancé, or some other person with whom she was connected, then pointed out how she stood above them all as Ahrensbach’s next aub. She clearly wanted us to praise her or give her advice on how to strengthen her duchy’s influence.

As our tea party continued, Detlinde made no attempt to inquire about or even mention the purge happening in Ehrenfest. I started to wonder whether she really was oblivious—whether Georgine was intentionally keeping her unaware and excluding her from her plan.

Detlinde continued to prattle on and on about herself and her position as the next aub... and soon enough, our meeting came to an uneventful end.

“That was tiring...”

Such were my first words upon our return to the Ehrenfest Dormitory. We had spent the entire tea party being expected to prop up our host, and as it had been a private tea party without guests from other duchies, we had been treated entirely like a lesser, inferior duchy while everything went as Detlinde wished. It really had been exhausting.

To me, the worst part had been when Detlinde started bragging about the legendary tales of Ferdinand—which she had apparently gathered from other students and those who had attended alongside him—as though they were based on her own accomplishments. I’d only barely suppressed the urge to scream that he had still been from Ehrenfest when all those things had taken place.

“I was fearful of what she might know about Ehrenfest’s current situation and prepared for her to start probing us,” Charlotte said, “but I evidently worried for nothing.”

I shook my head. “Lady Detlinde might have been oblivious, but there were moments when her retainers seemed especially tense. I expect that some of them know more than she does.”

Wilfried frowned, his face clouded with concern. “I know this isn’t our problem, but I’m kind of worried about Lady Detlinde. Is she gonna be okay as the next aub when her own retainers are hiding so much from her?”

“Perhaps they are doing it because she is only planned to be a temporary aub,” Charlotte said.

Indeed, considering their behavior, I was fairly certain that Detlinde’s retainers were actively hiding information from her. The real question was whether they were carrying out Aub Ahrensbach’s will or enacting some plot by Georgine.

“I feel like that’ll just make things worse when she eventually does find out, but...” Wilfried trailed off.

“That is something for those of Ahrensbach to think about,” I interjected with a sigh. “As long as it doesn’t impact Ferdinand, it’s nothing for us to bother ourselves with.”

Wilfried glared at me; his dark-green eyes really were just like Detlinde’s. “Your tone was a little cold there, Rozemyne. Aren’t you worried about Lady Detlinde?”

I could guess that Wilfried related to Detlinde in some regards; after all, he had once been kept in the dark, manipulated, and fooled into tarnishing his own reputation. Unfortunately for him, I was so exhausted from dealing with her garbage that my heart was completely unmoved. The fact that I hadn’t outright said, “She can explode for all I care” deserved a medal, if you asked me.

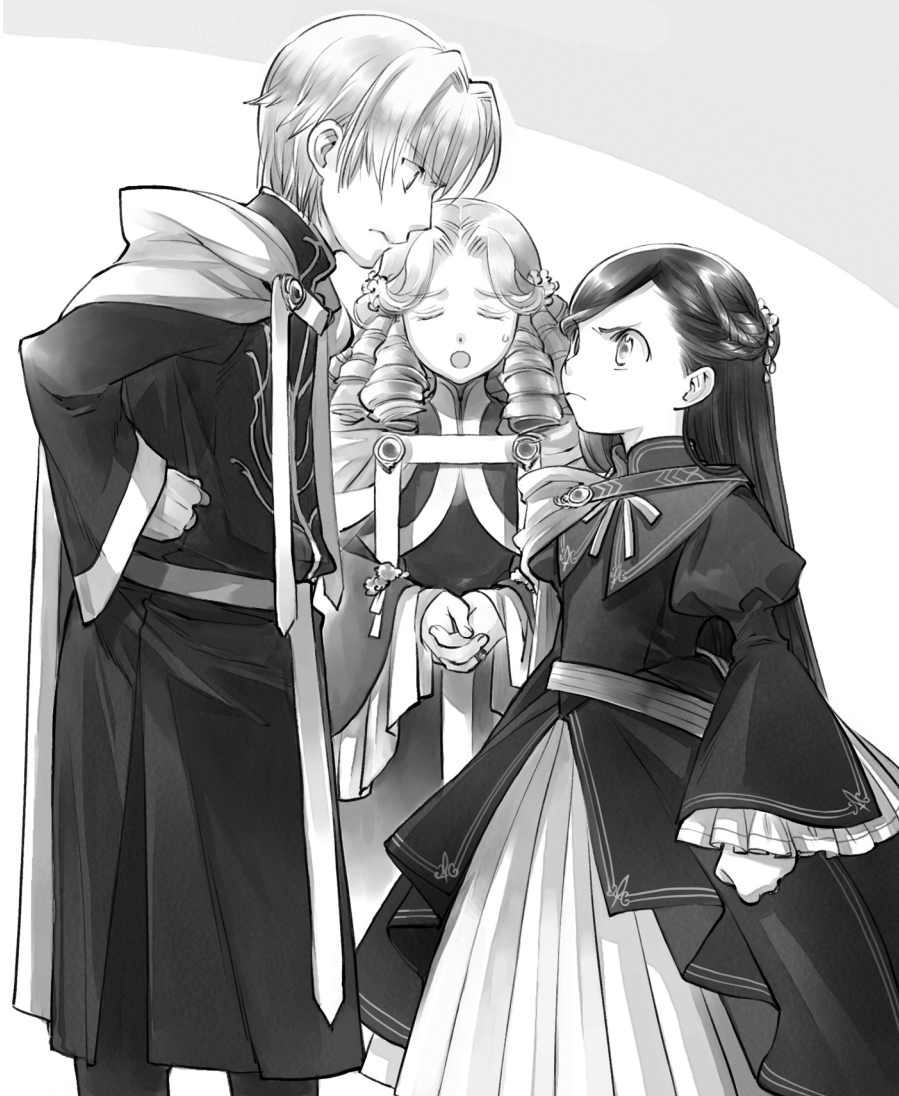
“If she is still so unaware despite her position as the next aub and having so many retainers by her side, then it must be the will of Aub Ahrensbach. I am far more concerned about her doing something that results in Ferdinand getting punished by association.”

“Uncle can manage. He’s strong enough on his own.”

Hearing him worry about Detlinde but not Ferdinand made something inside of me snap. “Ferdinand is not in the same position that he was in before, when he was in Ehrenfest; he has few people he can trust and no environment in which to make new magic tools. And on top of protecting himself, he must also protect Lady Letizia. I think *you* seem cold, Wilfried.”

I would rather he worry about his uncle, the man who had worked his fingers to the bone for his sake, than some nuisance who had no value to us other than being a way for us to contact Ferdinand.

Wilfried and I continued to glare at one another until Charlotte gave a heavy sigh. “Brother, Sister, neither one of you is being cold; you are simply worried about different people. The fact that you are fighting over something so trivial just goes to show how exhausted the two of you must be.”



“Charlotte...”

“You’re right. My bad.”

Having been admonished by our little sister, Wilfried and I apologized to each other and then had our attendants brew tea so that we could calm ourselves and start going over the tea party.

“By having Lady Detlinde, ignorant as she is, take center stage, they were able to hide their machinations—that is, Lady Georgine’s actions and intentions—even more thoroughly than would normally be the case,” I said. “This is rather painful for Ehrenfest.”

We had spent the entire tea party paying lip service to Detlinde’s boastful remarks and learned absolutely nothing new about Ahrensbach in the process. That realization suddenly made me feel all the more tired.

The tea parties didn’t end there; before I could even recover from the exhaustion of our time spent with Detlinde, I found myself needing to meet with some middle- and bottom-ranking duchies. I was still feeling absolutely miserable, so my fake smile was even more phony than usual.

This time, our sweets were the focus of excessive praise, with the participants even asking for the recipe. I decided to mention that Dunkelfelger had developed its own kind of pound cake made with its local specialty, rohes.

“They used their local specialty...? Why, that’s splendid. I will get my chefs to follow their example at once.”

“You certainly are on good terms with Dunkelfelger, Lady Rozemyne. You are even collaborating on research...”

“We of Immerdink asked to join but were refused. We only wanted to be of some assistance...”

Every duchy was interested in our joint research, since it provided an excellent chance to deepen one’s bonds with greater duchies. It was nice that this tea party wasn’t just a slew of negative rumors about Sylvester and the rest of my family, unlike my meeting with exclusively bottom-ranking duchies, but I didn’t want to listen to nonstop whining from those who hadn’t been allowed to join our research.

“Perhaps we will have an opportunity to collaborate next time,” I noted, putting a swift end to this topic of conversation. From there, I started talking about Ehrenfest’s books; some of the students here had already read our new volume after borrowing copies from Charlotte during other tea parties.

“Lady Lueuradi of Jossbrenner, I am told that you borrowed a copy from Charlotte as well,” I said. “Have you finished it already?”

“Oh, yes, I did. Last year’s volume of *Royal Academy Love Stories* was truly delightful, so I was on the edge of my seat for the new release.”

Lueuradi was here as an archnoble representative for Jossbrenner the Tenth, and she leapt at this opportunity to speak at length about *Royal Academy Love Stories*, her light-green eyes sparkling all the while. I was relieved to know that everyone was focused on books now.

“Lady Rozemyne, how are things with your fiancé, Lord Wilfried?” Lueuradi asked. “Do you share a wondrous romance like in the stories?”

I couldn’t help but falter in the face of so many hopeful stares. “Um... Our love is familial and nothing like what can be found in books. That said, is there not value in such stability? My mother says that stories should have dramatic peaks and valleys, but I would rather my own life be an even line.”

I was hoping that my lame response would make everyone tire of the discussion and move on, but Lueuradi continued to press me on the matter. “Oh my... You would say that your romance is so plain despite that magnificent hair ornament he has given you?”

“It is magnificent, isn’t it?” someone said in agreement. “It has so many rainbow feystones. Their love and passion is clear for all to see.”

Because members of the royal family and greater duchies had started gifting hairpins during their graduation ceremonies, students of middle- and bottom-ranking duchies were beginning to view hair ornaments as romantic objects that one received from one’s lover.

They measure love by the fanciness of one’s hair ornament? That’s news to me. No way can I ever tell them I got this from Ferdinand and not from my fiancé, Wilfried.

Keeping those thoughts in mind, I explained that my hair stick was a gift from *all* of my guardians, taking care to keep the details consistent with what I had already told others. This would more or less shatter the fantasies of these young girls, but I needed to emphasize that Ferdinand had designed it, else Detlinde’s inevitable hairpin disaster would give him a bad name.

“This hair stick was not a gift from Wilfried alone,” I said. “My guardians prepared the rainbow feystones, and my mentor, Ferdinand, designed the ornament.”

“My... Given how much they all must care about you, it seems strange to think that they sent you to the temple. You do not need to cover for your aub, Lady Rozemyne; we are on your side.”

Once again, Sylvester was being treated as a villain. Having to correct people all the time was getting seriously exhausting.

“I do not know what the temples of other duchies are like, but in

Ehrenfest, we take religious ceremonies very seriously,” I said. “I am not the only one who visits our temple; Wilfried, Charlotte, and even the aub himself go there as well.”

“I cannot believe that the Ehrenfest archducal family deigns to visit a temple. Those buildings are so filthy...”

Hm. That wasn't at all what I expected them to take away from that.

“Religious ceremonies are performed in the temple,” I explained, “and the duchy’s harvest will suffer unless the giebes’ chalices and the Central District are supplied with mana. Ehrenfest’s temple lacked the mana for that after our blue priests and shrine maidens were moved to the Sovereign temple, so we archduke candidates are acting in their stead.” Of course, I made sure to add that Wilfried and Charlotte likewise circled farming towns for Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival. “If your duchies are suffering from a smaller harvest, then I would advise that you have your archduke candidates do the same.”

“But going to the temple and to farming towns is simply...”

I was feeling increasingly foolish for smiling and repeating the same thing over and over again when my words were only ever met with ignorant grimaces. To be frank, I was sick of all this nonstop complaining from people who didn’t understand the importance of religious ceremonies or how bad things really were. It ticked me the heck off that these people couldn’t grasp how much Wilfried and Charlotte had struggled to take my place, even back when they had barely been able to control their mana.

“So, Lady Rozemyne,” said Immerdink’s archduke candidate. “Forget about the temple; I wish to discuss your joint research. What manner of research are you doing with the greater duchies?”

I shrugged. “For our research with Dunkelfelger, we are focusing on the religious ceremonies that you all despise so much.”

“We are not so opposed to religious ceremonies done in the Royal Academy. We have to perform the ritual for obtaining divine protections in class, so...”

Oh, I see. So it's the temple you take issue with, huh?

I spat on the inside—but then I was struck with an epiphany.

Wait. I've got it. It's perfect!

“As part of our joint research, Ehrenfest will be demonstrating a religious ceremony. Would you care to join? If we can obtain permission from Dunkelfelger, that is.”

“Oh my. You would allow me to?” the Immerdink archduke candidate asked with a bright smile, having been pleading to join for so long. She went on to say that I was very kind indeed, then grumbled that Charlotte had refused to budge no matter how much she asked.

“If you are allowing Immerdink, then I would like to join as well.”

“If men can participate, then I will speak with our archduke candidate.”

“Jossbrenner has no archduke candidates at present, so please allow me to participate as a representative.”

I smiled as everyone collectively asked for permission to join. Surprisingly enough, they didn’t seem to mind participating in religious ceremonies when it meant they could put their names on our joint research project.

“Of course, this all depends on us receiving Dunkelfelger’s permission,” I said. “I will ask them, but you all must do the same. Permission will only be granted if your passion is adequately conveyed.”

Given that Dunkelfelger had relied on passionate appeals and the verbal equivalent of a human wave attack to convince the king to send Ferdinand to Ahrensbach, I was sure it would embrace a similar approach from these girls. At the very least, it seemed far more likely to work than me asking on my own—and this way, everyone would be able to participate in our religious ceremony.

Oh, and I’ll need permission from the royal family too.

Doing a Little Scheming

“Milady, I wish to be told *exactly* what you are planning. What do you mean to accomplish by having archduke candidates from other duchies participate in this religious ceremony? We were told nothing of this!” Rihyarda declared immediately upon our return to the Ehrenfest Dormitory. I could tell from the way her eyebrows were raised, her hands were on her hips, and her feet were planted firmly that a lecture was on the horizon—but I hadn’t done anything to warrant one.

“This will only happen with Dunkelfelger’s permission, though,” I said.

“That is not the issue. My reproach is because you did not consult us before making such a significant move.”

“Did the aub not say that research done among students requires neither consultations nor permissions?” I asked, looking at her quizzically. There had to be some kind of misunderstanding at play.

Rihyarda shook her head. “Putting aside the fact that, in your case, you should be seeking such things regardless... I am saying that you should speak with your retainers, who work to your benefit. At the very least, tell us what you are thinking and planning before you take action.”

“But have we not already discussed the ritual to be performed as part of our joint research? I simply proposed that the other duchies take part. We will be doing it either way.”

Indeed, whether those students took part or not, the ritual was still going to be performed.

Rihyarda shook her head again. “Who are you trying to fool, exactly? We have only ever discussed you performing the ritual *alone*. Why have you suddenly decided to involve archduke candidates from other duchies?”

My retainers were all wearing stern expressions, and none of them argued against Rihyarda. I pursed my lips in dissatisfaction, then put on an exaggerated smile.

“Well, I can tell you one thing: I most certainly did not grow weary of putting up with greedy middle and lesser duchies who seek nothing but personal gain, speak ill of my adoptive family, mock rituals to no end, and refuse to listen to anything I say. Why, that wasn’t it at all.”

“You are rather frustrated, I see... You have gotten much better at concealing your emotions,” Rihyarda muttered, then shook her head in exasperation. “Now, you will need to learn how to keep those emotions from influencing your actions. But in any case, milady—what is your intention, having them participate in the ceremony?”

“If they receive permission from Dunkelfelger, then we will hold a Dedication Ritual here at the Royal Academy.”

“A Dedication Ritual...? As in, the one always performed at the temple around this time?” Philine asked, placing a hand on her cheek as if remembering Hartmut and the others preparing for it.

“Indeed,” I said. “Is there a more fitting ritual to show Dunkelfelger than the one I perform the most in Ehrenfest? I would struggle to fill the chalices myself, so I was racking my brain for an alternative... but with so many helpers, it should be easy.”

“Erm, Lady Rozemyne... is that not stealing mana from the archduke candidates of other duchies?” Gretia asked timorously. My other retainers paled as well.

I met her gaze and gave a refined cackle. “Oh my. Mind your phrasing there, Gretia. There will be no stealing. The participants will all be good-natured individuals who were so eager to assist us that they pleaded with Dunkelfelger for the privilege. They will be offering their mana out of the goodness of their hearts. It would be rude to call that theft, would it not? And I am sure the royal family will be pleased to see so many archduke candidates eager to help.”

I wasn’t forcing anyone to participate. Anyone who took issue with the ritual shouldn’t have asked to join in the first place.

“Lady Rozemyne, where exactly is the royal family going to be involved in this?” Laurenz asked, looking like he had just heard something extremely ominous. Theodore was bobbing his head in agreement, looking like he wanted to run away; both of them were evidently afraid of the royal family.

“We will need their permission to use the Royal Academy’s shrine, will we not? Furthermore, even if our participants have agreed to help, it would be in poor taste for me to use everyone’s mana for myself when the country is in such dire straits. That is why I intend to allow the royal family to use it all as they see fit.”

I was confident that the mana-deprived royal family would rejoice over an offering from such a large crowd of archduke candidates. Having their gratitude would also keep our participants from complaining.

After listening to my explanation with a frown, Matthias nodded, his blue eyes now carrying a certain thoughtfulness. “Do you think Dunkelfelger is likely to give these students permission after refusing so many others? The opinions of greater duchies cannot be changed so

easily.”

I curved my lips into a grin. “I am sure that those from Dunkelfelger will be a little more open to the idea—after I suggest that they only accept those who play them at dinner, of course. It can only work to their advantage, as they wish to both investigate the ritual and face more opponents.”

“In other words, you mean to sacrifice our so-called ‘good-natured participants’ to Dunkelfelger...” Matthias said in a daze.

“Tut, tut. More poor phrasing. Those students will simply be proving their fervent desire to join our research. I’m certainly not thinking about how this will save me from having to find another ritual, nor how they will spare me the trouble of dealing with Dunkelfelger. No, not at all.”

“They will also be providing more opportunities for us to research Dunkelfelger’s dinner rituals,” Leonore added with a smile, having been convinced that this was in our best interests. “Why, they are so passionate and willing to help that I can hardly believe it. I am entirely in favor of Lady Rozemyne’s suggestion.”

Matthias sighed and then muttered, “I’ll admit, we wouldn’t want to have to play dinner over and over again...”

Dunkelfelger was a greater duchy with a very large population, so all of our duchy’s apprentice knights had to come together whenever we faced them at dinner. That was all well and good for the occasional game, but it would become increasingly problematic if we had to play against them repeatedly and under varying conditions. Wilfried’s and Charlotte’s guard knights would need to be mobilized too.

“Dunkelfelger will get to explore its ritual and play dinner, I will receive the assistance I need for my ceremony, the royal family will receive a boon of mana... and finally, the lesser and middle duchies will get to participate in our joint research. Sure, the participants may find themselves stretched thin between dealing with Dunkelfelger and having audiences with the royal family, and they may struggle more when trying to use their mana during classes, but is this not a glorious idea that benefits all parties?”

My retainers gave uncomfortable looks, like they agreed and disagreed at the same time.

“You have listed a lot of advantages for others, Lady Rozemyne, but what do *you* gain from this personally?”

“I would say that not having to play more dinner with Dunkelfelger is enough... but, in truth, there is something else I seek. I cannot reveal any more than that, but let me just say this: if the royal family approves, then we will gain tremendously.”

And so, I wrote to Dunkelfelger and to Hildebrand. I’d selected the third prince specifically because I was asking to use the Royal

Academy's facilities, and I figured that he was more likely to give me permission than Anastasius.

In my letters, I made sure to cover all the important details: that there were many who wished to join our research, what Dunkelfelger would gain from forcing them to play ditto first, that it was in our best interests to have more people witness Ehrenfest's Dedication Ritual, how the mana obtained would be given to the royal family, and that I wanted to use the shrine within the Farthest Hall.

"I will need to hear more first," came a response. "Come to my villa tomorrow afternoon."

I sent the letter to Prince Hildebrand, but Anastasius replied... It just doesn't make sense.

In the end, I was summoned to Anastasius's villa once again. My request was only to borrow the shrine in the Farthest Hall, so I was relatively fine about going—but that soon changed when I actually arrived. As well as Hannelore and her retainers, our two dormitory supervisors had been called. This joint research project among students had suddenly turned into a big hullabaloo.

"Now, Rozemyne—tell us exactly what you intend to do," Anastasius demanded with a glare, seeming exceedingly on guard. "Hide nothing."

I described our joint research project and explained my intentions for Ehrenfest's ritual. Naturally, I made sure to emphasize that the royal family would benefit considerably.

After listening to my explanation, Anastasius placed a hand on his forehead before looking between Hannelore and me. "Why do the both of you always turn small matters into large ones?"

"The both of us?" I repeated.

Hannelore looked down at her feet, embarrassed. "I, um... caused a bit of a fuss and troubled the royal family."

As it turned out, while researching their ritual, Dunkelfelger had ended up creating a massive pillar of light. The royal family had received a lot of questions about the strange event, though I had to wonder—had it resulted from Hannelore and the others trying to recreate the ritual that I'd performed...?

"That... is my fault, isn't it?" I asked.

"Not at all. We experimented with offering our mana as you did, Lady Rozemyne, and with changing the spear into various forms. The result was, as you now know, that tremendous light, which formed even in our dormitory. We are entirely to blame."

They had apparently separated into two teams to perform the pre-ditto ritual in the training grounds built next to their dormitory. It really spoke to their extravagant wealth as a greater duchy.

Well, that doesn't surprise me. Dunkelfelger will do anything or spend any amount of mana for the sake of getting stronger.

"We had many duchies come to us yesterday asking to participate in our joint research," said Rauffen, their dormitory supervisor. A broad smile then spread across his face. "First you lit a fire under everyone with *A Ditter Story* and a ritual for obtaining real blessings, and now you've given us a mountain of opponents. I can't thank you enough, Lady Rozemyne. Your reputation in our dormitory shot up all at once; we threw a huge celebration last night in your honor."

Yeah, I don't really want a reputation like that, thanks.

I'd been hoping that the wave of new challengers would slow Dunkelfelger down a little, but they had welcomed them all without even breaking a sweat. In fact, now they were inviting *other* duchies to participate too.

"If you intend to play ditter after receiving blessings from the gods, then perhaps you should allow the other duchies to group together into teams," I said. "Plus, if you demonstrate the strength that can be obtained through rituals, they might take religious ceremonies more seriously henceforth." It would be just like how I'd told Ehrenfest's apprentice knights to learn from Dunkelfelger and earn blessings on their own.

"Hm."

"Erm, rather... won't it be way more exciting for Dunkelfelger if your opponents are stronger too?"

"INDEED!"

Rauffen was clearly enthusiastic, though our conversation began to simmer down now that we were in agreement. It was then that Hannelore nervously spoke up.

"We are fine with letting these other duchies participate, as Dunkelfelger benefits as well, but will there not be too many names to credit? My brother said their contributions will hardly be meaningful."

I personally disagreed with that last statement, since they were going to be participating in the Dedication Ritual *and* playing ditter, but that still meant very little to Dunkelfelger.

Playing ditter and performing rituals come as naturally as breathing to Dunkelfelgerians. It makes sense that they don't consider them worthy of credit.

We needed some kind of compromise—something that would ease Dunkelfelger's concerns that the other duchies weren't doing enough while simultaneously appeasing those who wanted credit. Now that I thought about it, however, I'd only extended invitations for people to participate in the ritual. There hadn't been any promises of them being credited; they had convinced themselves of that.

After some thought, I pointed a finger in the air and smiled. "In

that case, how about we list them as *helpers* at the end of the research announcement? We can list the names of the apprentice knights who answered our questionnaire and the archduke candidates and archnobles who assisted with the ritual, while the joint research itself remains between Dunkelfelger and Ehrenfest. Everyone should be satisfied with that.”

“W-Well...” Hannelore examined me carefully for a moment, then nodded. “That will do, I suppose. I am sure my brother will agree too.”

“Please tell Lord Lestilaut to do his best with his classes; we must wait for him to finish before we can start the ritual.”

“It should not be long now. He has been working especially hard to impress you with his speed,” Hannelore said with a wry smile, remarking on how her brother was blazing through his classes. He was apparently due to finish at about the same time he had finished last year—a remarkable feat given that he was now a sixth-year.

“Well, consider me surprised. I did not think he had it in him. Do contact me when your ditter games with the other duchies are over and you have decided on our participants for the ritual.”

“You can count on me!” came an unexpected interjection from Rauffen. Hannelore and I glanced at him, then shrugged in unison.

Anastasius cleared his throat. “Rozemyne, regarding your request... You may not know this, but the shrine in the Farthest Hall is managed by the Sovereign temple.”

I was already aware of that fact; after all, the Sovereign temple was responsible for performing both the Starbind Ceremony at the Archduke Conference and the Royal Academy’s coming-of-age ceremony.

“You will need their permission to use the Academy’s divine instruments,” Anastasius continued, “but it seems they are fairly busy at the moment.”

“Yes, the Dedication Ritual is surely underway around this time,” I replied.

The Sovereign temple had scraped together the blue priests and shrine maidens with the most mana from all sorts of duchies, so it probably wasn’t struggling as much as Ehrenfest. At the same time, though, it was possible that it had more chalices to fill.

“In that case,” I continued, “I will take what we need from Ehrenfest. Could we at least borrow the room with the shrine? I want our participants to understand they are praying to the gods.”

“You may—as long as you do not touch the shrine itself.”

“I am grateful,” I replied, but then something occurred to me. “U-Um, but if we cannot touch the shrine, then we won’t be able to take down the chalices to fill them with mana, will we? How will we get

around that? Could you make an exception for that one case?"

We could always get Ehrenfest to send over a mana-conducting carpet, but unless we could actually move the chalices, we wouldn't be able to offer our mana.

"No, no. We must accept that our hands are tied."

"I suppose I can just make a chalice with my schtappe, so that won't be a problem, but..."

"You can?!" Anastasius exclaimed, wide-eyed.

I could indeed; one of the spells that I'd come across in the underground archive had outlined the process clearly.

"However," I continued, "the royal family will not be able to bring my chalice back to the Sovereignty. You will either need to learn to make chalices yourselves, or you will need to bring an abundance of empty feystones."

It would be far quicker for the royal family to make chalices with their schtappes, but creating divine instruments was only doable if you'd frequently channeled mana into them. It would also be impossible to make chalices without touching the shrine, and maintaining them would require an exceedingly large amount of mana—more than the royal family could spare, I assumed. For those reasons, perhaps the feystone approach was more reasonable.

Anastasius heaved a tired sigh; the royal family had apparently been convinced that they would need to pass on this generous offering of mana, as they didn't expect the Sovereign temple to allow it. "So, in other words, if we are unable to borrow the divine instruments, we can fashion chalices ourselves or move the mana from your chalice using empty feystones. You certainly know many underhanded tricks, Rozemyne."

I cackled. "You can thank my teacher."

Anastasius put a hand on his forehead again. "To be frank, the windfall mana you are providing through this Dedication Ritual will be of tremendous help to us."

"I am glad to hear it. I would like the royal family to participate as well, but will that be possible?"

"You wish for *us* to participate?" Anastasius asked, again surprised.

I gave a solemn nod. By having them take the lead, we could make it all the more difficult for other duchies to back out. Plus, the royal family needed divine protections, and the more opportunities they had to pray seriously, the better.

"Am I right to assume that this conflict with the Sovereign temple has prevented the royal family from engaging in any true religious ceremonies?" I asked. "Praying together improves the flow of mana and makes it easier to receive blessings, so why not join us? Of course,

you are by no means obliged to.”

“I... shall think about it.”

Thus concluded the groundwork for the ritual.

After receiving a scolding from Hirschur, who told me not to interrupt her research with such pointless summons again, I returned to the dormitory and reported back to Ehrenfest. I explained the sequence of events that had resulted in our plan to perform a Dedication Ritual with the royal family, then asked them to send over a mana-conducting carpet, offerings to the gods, my ceremonial High Bishop robes, and my siblings’ ceremonial robes, among other things.

“Charlotte and I are joining too?” Wilfried asked.

“Indeed. If we all perform together and in the same way, then we can eradicate one negative rumor contributing to our father’s bad reputation. This is going to be your first time joining me for the Dedication Ritual, but the process is the same as channeling mana into the foundational magic. I have no doubts that you will succeed on your first attempt, so please try to act as though you have done it all a hundred times before.”

They both nodded in response.

“Lady Rozemyne, a reply from Ehrenfest has arrived.”

According to the letter, our situation here in the Royal Academy had blown so far out of proportion that Florencia had fainted upon reading my report. A note written in Sylvester’s hand specified two things: that they would be sending everything we needed, and that we weren’t to fail *under any circumstances* now that the royal family was involved.

Incidentally, also included was a letter from Hartmut. He had apparently cried bitter tears upon reading Clarissa’s report and was once again bemoaning the fact that he had graduated “too soon.” His handwriting was a little, er, *intense*. He had written so forcefully that the lines were all shaky, and each word was practically engraved in the page.

“I’m actually kind of afraid to return to Ehrenfest now...” Leonore muttered. “Hartmut is going to be an enormous pain, I’m sure.”

I sent a response to Hartmut, explaining my plan to have all of my adult retainers redo their divine protections ceremonies and noting that he would want to memorize the gods’ names and pray to them daily in preparation. I thought that having something to do would raise his spirits, but Judithe was unconvinced.

“Hartmut will complete that task in no time,” she said. “Perhaps you should also ask him to help Angelica memorize the names. That should keep him busy all winter.”

Philine’s face turned a shade paler. “Won’t that just put more of a

burden on Damuel...?”

“Ah,” Judithe squeaked, then laughed. “I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“N-No, he w-won’t!”

As my retainers continued to chatter, the corners of my lips curved into a warm smile. It was nice to see them acting like such good friends.

Indeed, for the first time in a while, I was truly at peace.

Preparing for the Ritual

We had agreed to perform the Dedication Ritual in front of the shrine in the room behind the Royal Academy's auditorium, but it wasn't going to happen right away—Lestilaut still needed to finish his classes, and Ehrenfest had to complete its own Dedication Ritual. In the meantime, the duchies that had approached Dunkelfelger about joining our research would play ditto to decide who was actually allowed to participate.

"Muriella, please send an ordonnanz to Dunkelfelger regarding the participants," I said. "Ask them to grant permission only to archnobles and archduke candidates, as anyone with a smaller mana capacity will struggle greatly. Furthermore, inform them that any first-years who have just recently learned mana compression cannot participate either."

Even while relying on feystones filled with my mana, Wilfried and Charlotte had struggled to perform the ritual back when they were just getting used to controlling their own mana. Plus, in other duchies, it was apparently common for children to wait until they had picked up a mana compression method at the Royal Academy before supplying their foundational magic. We wouldn't have adults there to assist all of the beginners, so it was simply too dangerous for those who had never supplied mana before to participate.

"A reply has come, Lady Rozemyne—they accept your conditions and are prepared to play. They are just waiting for the lesser and middle duchies to form teams among themselves."

Wowee. They all have my deepest sympathies.

I clasped my hands in silent prayer, then reached for the books that I was borrowing. "I suppose I shall read for now. Everything else can be prepared after the temple's Dedication Ritual is concluded."

And so, my time was spent leisurely reading books, going to Hirschur's laboratory, and just otherwise relaxing. I attended some tea parties, but pretty much all anyone did was complain about having to play ditto to participate in our research.

It seemed that those from Dunkelfelger still weren't massively impressed that we had finessed our way into playing speed rather than treasure-stealing ditto previously, as they had taken great care to ensure that these next games were going to be of the treasure-stealing variety. The other duchies had certainly learned about this version

during written lessons, but they had never actually played it. As a result, even after forming a team of their best players, they had been utterly thrashed. No amount of rejuvenation potions had been enough.

I smiled at their grumbling. "Ditter is a necessary requirement for doing research with Dunkelfelger. Ehrenfest had to play against them as well."

Though our game of treasure-stealing ditter took place during my first year. Still, I'm not lying to them. Mm-hmm.

All this talk about joint research and playing ditter was so much less emotionally draining than listening to people bad-mouth Sylvester. For the first time in my life, I was actually grateful for Dunkelfelger's obsession.

Aside from that, I also had to listen to progress reports from the apprentice scholars doing research with Drewanchel. Gundolf was putting a lot of passion into the project, apparently; he had already included the paper in various brews that brought out the special traits of each feyplant. The changes themselves were only slight, such as the nanseb paper we used for identification traveling faster or showing movements from farther distances than before.

"So the paper's effects are enhanced..." I mused. "My end goal is to produce moving books for my library, which are sure to be much heavier than lone sheets of paper, so please tell them to keep working hard until such a thing is possible. These books will also include magic circles, and I would like to reduce mana expenditure by improving the quality of the ingredients."

Apparently, one could transcribe a song onto a sheet of effon paper and then run a feystone across it to produce music. Still, there was plenty more room for research.

"If one simply needs to move a feystone over the sheet music, then perhaps we could stick effon paper to instruments to create automatic performances," I murmured. My thoughts immediately wandered to a pipe organ from my Urano days that had automatically played whatever music roll was inserted into it. The spectacle truly had been amazing.

I had mostly been speaking to myself, but Marianne heard my mutterings and said, "Allow me to pass these suggestions on to Professor Gundolf. We of Ehrenfest were recently chastised for having 'no interesting ideas.'"

"If you are fine with using my thoughts rather than your own, then certainly."

It seemed that Ehrenfest's scholars weren't yet able to keep up with those from Drewanchel, who were pouring their all into their research. Marianne in particular had lost some of her confidence.

"After you graduate and return to Ehrenfest, there will not be

many opportunities for you to participate in research of such a high caliber as this project with Drewanchel,” I said. “Though there may be times when you struggle with the perceived gap between you and the other students or when you feel disheartened by the stern words of your professors, you mustn’t get so down. Keep your chin up and press on with your research.”

We had just received a report from Clarissa, informing us that Lestilaut had finished his classes. She had also included the results of their questionnaire; it seemed that Dunkelfelger’s attendants and scholars of the sword possessed many divine protections as well.

“Dunkelfelger truly is a duchy that exists for and has thrived on ditter,” Philine observed, moved.

I gave a firm nod of agreement. “According to what was discussed during the tea party, the apprentice knights are still overwhelmed by the ditter matches. Dunkelfelger may be livelier than ever, but the other duchies are exhausted.”

“I can imagine.” Philine then produced a board, which she extended to me. “On that note, here is a list of students who will be participating in the ritual. Do have a look.”

I accepted and then started to read from the board. Listed were the duchies that had passed the ditter selection process, and alongside each one were the names of three to eight students, with the higher-ranked duchies having more representation. More than half of all the duchies in Yurgenschmidt were due to participate, with more than sixty students in total.

“I see there are going to be greater duchies participating as well,” I said. “I had assumed they would simply observe until the results became clear.”

“This is a perfect opportunity to learn what other duchies are researching ahead of time, and our research into increasing one’s divine protections is expected to draw more attention than anything at the Interduchy Tournament.”

In other words, they were taking full advantage of this chance to participate in what was sure to be a very big event. Names from Klassenberg, Drewanchel, and Ahrensbach were listed as well. Every single archduke candidate from Drewanchel was going to be involved, while Ahrensbach was putting forward only apprentice scholars, meaning that Detlinde would not be participating herself.

I tilted my head as I continued to look through the names. “I see that Immerdink is not here, despite how much its representatives expressed their desire to participate during tea parties.”

“There were only a few lesser and middle duchies with the leeway to play ditter. Many backed out when they heard about others getting

beaten down and the costs of rejuvenation potions and such.”

Mm... I can see why. I dumped all this on other duchies specifically because I didn't want to endure it myself.

I wondered whether the Dedication Ritual would prove a nightmare for the duchies that had expended a ton of rejuvenation potions on their ditter games. Ehrenfest's gathering spot was overflowing with high-quality ingredients, but the same could not be said for those of other duchies.

Maybe we should distribute rejuvenation potions...

“Lady Rozemyne, we will need to explain the process of the ritual to the participants,” Philine continued, snapping me back to reality.

“True. Let's see... I suppose they will need to know to cleanse themselves on the morning of the ritual, to prepare rejuvenation potions, and to memorize the relevant prayer. They will not have ceremonial robes, but there is no helping that,” I said, recalling my days as an apprentice blue shrine maiden, when the temple had only wanted me for my mana. “Perhaps we should send these instructions by ordonnanz and then guide the apprentice scholars separately. The prayer they need is written on this board, so have them transcribe it for themselves.”

“Understood,” my apprentice scholars replied, all nodding their assent.

“Rozemyne,” Wilfried called out to me, looking worried, “I don't know the prayer for the Dedication Ritual either. I've only ever helped with Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival.”

“It is the same prayer that we speak when supplying mana to the foundational magic. Would you like a reminder, though?” I wrote the prayer out on a separate board and then handed it over.

After skimming the text, Wilfried visibly relaxed and sighed in relief. Charlotte looked it over as well, having been watching from the sideline, then smiled; she was going to be fine with it as well.

“By the way,” Wilfried said, “we got a report from Ehrenfest. Seems like their Dedication Ritual is over, and they're preparing the tools we need. Sounds like getting everything from the temple to the castle during the snow is proving difficult.”

Moving luggage was never a problem with my Pandabus, but those in Ehrenfest were currently relying on normal highbeasts. They had also yet to slay this year's Lord of Winter, so the blizzards were at their worst. Cornelius, Hartmut, and the others were apparently having to go back and forth between the temple and the castle.

Wilfried continued, “They also said you should get the royal family's permission for Hartmut to participate in the ritual.”

Just as Ferdinand had brought the bible last year, there needed to be someone present who could manage the tools used for the ritual.

Hartmut maintained that this duty belonged to the High Priest.

"I get the feeling that he just wants to see your ritual, Lady Rozemyne..." Judithe said.

Leonore nodded. "Without a doubt."

Philine and Roderick exchanged glances, both wearing amused smiles.

"I imagine you are correct, Judithe, but there are no gray priests in the Royal Academy to prepare the ritual," Philine said. "Nor are we receiving help from the Sovereign temple, correct?"

"Status is important when working in the Royal Academy," Roderick added. "You will struggle to manage and prepare everything on your own, Lady Rozemyne, and Hartmut, an archnoble, would make for an ideal assistant."

Indeed, it would be a struggle to carry out the ritual with only those from the Ehrenfest Dormitory. Philine and Roderick had both witnessed Hartmut's preparations for becoming the High Priest, and they knew how many strict, detailed traditions needed to be observed during religious ceremonies, but that wasn't enough. They didn't have any of the temple's ceremonies memorized, nor had they even watched one, as only the priests were allowed to attend. We needed someone who could take charge.

"I suppose we have no choice but to summon Hartmut," I conceded.

I swiftly wrote a letter to Eglantine. No matter which member of the royal family I attempted to contact, it was always Anastasius who replied, so maybe we would have been better off sending it his way to begin with.

As expected, an ordonnanz soon arrived from Anastasius. He said that Hartmut was allowed to attend, then added, "Father is going to be participating in the ritual as well, so send us both a thorough description of the process and a list of every expected participant. He seems to believe it proper and necessary to thank all those who are gathering to offer us mana."

The king himself was going to participate, perhaps because I had advised the royal family to experience rituals for themselves. They would surely receive plenty of divine protections if they learned the prayer for the Dedication Ritual, since they were pouring such enormous quantities of mana into Yurgenschmidt.

But while I merely saw this as a nice opportunity to ease the burden on the royal family, everyone else was absolutely losing their minds.

"Hold on!" Wilfried yelped. "*The king* is joining?! Doesn't that make this an even huger deal than it was already?!"

"This is unexpected, dear brother, but there is no stopping it

now,” Charlotte said, a vacant look in her eyes.

“Is this really that serious?” I asked. “All we’re doing is getting everyone to offer up their mana.”

Charlotte gave me a very troubled look. “I can understand why you may not value mana much yourself, Sister—your capacity is so large, and receiving all those divine protections has given you more than you can handle—but the shortage affecting the world is severe beyond words. The king himself considers it necessary to thank those who are offering theirs in support.”

“Normally, the only way to get direct praise from the king is to come first-in-class,” Wilfried added. “Yet now he’s offering to praise all of our participants. That’s how big of a deal this ritual of yours has become.”

Charlotte was right: my abundance of mana had caused me to greatly underestimate its value. Only now was it occurring to me that my little plot had ballooned out of control.

As requested, I copied the ritual process and a list of participants onto a board, which I then had delivered to Anastasius’s villa.

“If mana really is this important, then perhaps I should offer rejuvenation potions as a participation reward...” I mused aloud.

“A participation reward...?” Charlotte repeated, blinking.

I nodded. “It seems the duchies that played ditto had to use a significant number of rejuvenation potions in the process. Surely they will need more after offering their mana.”

The lesser and middle duchies were already assisting us with the ritual; it would be too great an ask to have them supply their own potions on top of that. Plus, if they could immediately replenish their mana, then perhaps they would feel more at ease about it being stolen.

“As we are going to be receiving so much mana from everyone,” I continued, “perhaps we should distribute Ferdinand’s kindness-filled potions to help everyone recover.”

“Sister, I do not mean to sound rude, but any duchies that receive those potions will surely assume they are some manner of cruel joke. Is there not something better tasting that we could give them?”

Blenrus fruits made the rejuvenation potions fairly drinkable, but they were rare and could only be gathered in Haldenzel. That is to say, they weren’t something we could easily obtain in the Royal Academy.

“If we’d rather use an alternative... there are potions that rejuvenate one’s mana but don’t relieve exhaustion.” I wasn’t sure about using those, however, as the students not used to the ritual were sure to end up feeling completely spent.

“Replenishing their mana should be enough. How do they taste,

though?"

"Not that bad, in my opinion."

"But how are we supposed to trust your sense of taste when you down Uncle's potions like they're nothing?" Wilfried asked. "We should taste-test them ourselves."

Charlotte nodded in enthusiastic agreement, so I went into the dormitory's brewing room and made a few mana-exclusive rejuvenation potions for them to try. Also serving as our test subjects were the apprentice knights who had gathered the ingredients.

"It doesn't taste that bad," Wilfried said. "Not much different from normal rejuvenation potions."

"The strength and onset of action is far inferior, though," I noted. "If we are going to distribute them to other duchies, then we would want something more effective. Let us go with the kindness-infused potions."

Unfortunately, it seemed that I was the only one who held this opinion; the apprentice knights who regularly used normal potions for their classes all shook their heads.

"For those of us who are used to normal potions, the less effective version is more than enough. They act quickly and restore a lot of mana."

"Plus, rather than giving the other students potions they may refuse based on the taste and smell, is it not safer to distribute something they are guaranteed to drink?"

On the strong, *strong* recommendation of Charlotte and the apprentice knights, I elected to distribute mana-only rejuvenation potions. They could easily be made from ingredients that were readily available at our gathering spot.

"In that case, we shall make potions for all participants," I said. There was no time for me to ask Ferdinand whether leaking the recipe was okay, so I simply asked Roderick and Muriella to help and ordered them to tell no one.

"Lady Rozemyne, I believe you could have done this on your own..." Roderick said, exhausted, having taken quite some time to cut and subsequently brew the ingredients.

Muriella smiled and noted that it would have been improper for me to hole up in the brewing room all on my own. And with that, she began carrying the boxes out of the brewing room.

It was the day of the ritual.

After finishing our breakfast, we archduke candidates were carrying out final checks in the common room when Hartmut arrived from the teleporter, dressed in his ceremonial blue priest robes. "Lady

Rozemyne,” he said, “I have with me the tools required for the ritual. And here are your ceremonial robes.”

“Rihyarda, Gretia—please make the necessary preparations to change my clothes,” I said. They sprang into action at my instruction, as did those serving Wilfried and Charlotte.

“Lord Wilfried, Lady Charlotte, as you have never participated in the ritual, you do not have cords or ornaments that are the divine color of winter,” Hartmut said. “I have asked your retainers to find materials and such that will do as replacements.”

Apparently, this task was keeping their castle attendants especially busy.

“The ceremony is this afternoon,” I said. “We must ask the royal family to open the Farthest Hall, then spend the morning carrying out any final preparations. Hartmut, can I trust you to oversee things there?”

“You may count on me. This is a ritual representing Lady Rozemyne, the Saint of Ehrenfest. It must be perfect. I offer my prayers and gratitude to the gods that I am able to participate in the Royal Academy’s Dedication Ritual!” Hartmut declared, drawing all eyes to himself as he pretty much launched into prayer. I was a little concerned about his over-the-top enthusiasm, but we were moments away from a ritual that was going to involve the royal family; having someone so invested in making things perfect was just what I needed.

As I watched Hartmut out of the corner of my eye while he continued to pray, I sent an ordonnanz to the royal family. Only they, archdukes, and those entrusted with the royal family’s mana through feystones were able to open the Farthest Hall. That was one of the reasons why there always needed to be a member of the royal family present at the Royal Academy.

“All of my retainers not preparing my changes of clothes—that is, everyone except Rihyarda and Gretia—will be accompanying me to the Farthest Hall,” I said. “It would be rude of us to arrive after the royal family, so let us hurry.”

Wilfried and Charlotte likewise brought their retainers along. We had our retinue bring everything we would need for the ceremony, then started waiting in the auditorium. Hildebrand arrived in no time at all.

“Rozemyne,” he said.

“Prince Hildebrand. I offer my humble gratitude for your assistance today.”

After we had exchanged lengthy greetings, Hildebrand got his head attendant, Arthur, to lift him up so that he could touch the feystone on the door leading to the Farthest Hall. It promptly opened.

“For classes, we lend feystones to the professors so they can open

the door themselves,” Hildebrand explained. “Today, however, I was really adamant about doing it myself.”

Hildebrand was still too young to participate in the actual ritual; he had asked to join, but it would be unacceptable for a member of the royal family to overexert themselves and pass out, so we had asked Anastasius to talk him out of it. Perhaps as a compromise to keep Hildebrand from feeling too left out, the king had permitted him to open the door instead.

After ensuring that everything we needed was brought into the Farthest Hall, Hartmut started to oversee the preparations. I was about to follow after him, but Brunhilde tugged on my sleeve and smiled at me; it seemed that my duty here was to deal with Hildebrand.

“Father has ordered that only those from Ehrenfest may enter the hall until the preparations are finished,” Hildebrand said.

“I see that you are actively looking for ways to assist us, Prince Hildebrand,” I said, finding his pride in his job very heartwarming. From there, I answered any questions he had about the ritual.

“Rozemyne, there are a lot of people due to participate today, aren’t there? Where will the guard knights be standing?”

“No guard knights may be present for ceremonial events. Only those participating in the ritual are allowed inside the Farthest Hall.”

“What...?” Hildebrand asked, blinking.

I started blinking in turn. “Only priests and shrine maidens may be present for ceremonies. The same is true for the Sovereign temple’s Starbind Ceremony, is it not? I asked them whether I could bring guard knights with me when participating as the High Bishop, and they were strongly against it. This is also a religious ceremony, so any guard knights will need to wait outside the auditorium.”

Arthur inhaled sharply and then cried, “I was not aware of this!” His eyes were wide, and he was intensely resistant to the idea, but I wasn’t going to budge.

“There will be a great many archduke candidates involved in the ritual,” I said, “and there simply is not room for everyone to bring their retainers inside. Furthermore, all those present when the mana begins to flow will be at risk of having their mana sucked out, whether they are actively participating or not. Any guard knights in attendance will struggle to protect their charge effectively.”

“But there is no precedent for archduke candidates or members of the royal family leaving their guard knights behind. It is unthinkable,” Arthur protested. Both he and Hildebrand were unwilling to accept reality.

“As I understand it, the one religious ceremony that archduke candidates and the members of the royal family still perform is Mana Replenishment upon their foundations,” I said. “In Ehrenfest, guard

knights cannot enter the room where we supply mana to the foundational magic and instead stand at attention outside the door. Do guard knights enter the Mana Replenishment hall in the Sovereignty?"

"No," Arthur replied. "Only those of the royal family who are supplying their mana."

"The same principle applies to all other religious ceremonies as well. Now, let me propose this: would the royal family feel safe if we positioned only Ehrenfest guard knights in the room for the ceremony?"

"No; they would only feel safe in the presence of the Sovereign Knight's Order," Arthur replied, airing his distrust of other duchies.

"Precisely. And with the participants in such vulnerable positions, having to kneel with their hands on the floor and channel their mana, it is only natural that they would be on guard against those with weapons. Just as the royal family would not be able to trust Ehrenfest's guard knights, we would not be able to trust the guard knights of another duchy. It is best that we simply rid ourselves of those with malice to begin with."

"Rid ourselves of those with malice? How would we accomplish that?"

"By filtering the participants through Schutzaria's shield. Those who wish the royal family ill will not be able to enter."

The Royal Academy's Dedication Ritual

Hildebrand and his entourage took their leave, then we did the same, entrusting the remaining preparations to Hartmut and returning to the Ehrenfest Dormitory.

While I was getting changed into my ceremonial robes, I received an ordonnanz from Hildebrand, who had since finished his report to the king. We were being summoned to explain the circumstances of the ceremony to the king himself, meaning we had to make our way to the auditorium sooner than planned.

And so, we started down the halls once again, Wilfried and everyone else looking sick to their stomachs. We met up with Dunkelfelger along the way.

"Oh my," Hannelore said, surprised. "Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte are wearing temple clothes as well, I see."

"These are formal outfits within the temple," I explained. "My siblings have their own, since they perform religious ceremonies back in Ehrenfest. Under normal circumstances, all participants would need to be dressed in such robes, but we have relaxed the standards due to a lack of time."

Hannelore merely blinked at my response.

Not long after we arrived at the auditorium, we met with the royal family and the Sovereign Knight's Order.

Aren't there a few too many royals here?

I could recognize Eglantine, Anastasius, and Sigiswald, for obvious reasons. Adolphine was also participating as the fiancée of royalty. However, there were two royals whom I was meeting for the first time. The first, an older man, was the king. The second, a younger woman, was presumably Sigiswald's wife.

"Lady Rozemyne, Prince Hildebrand informed me that—"

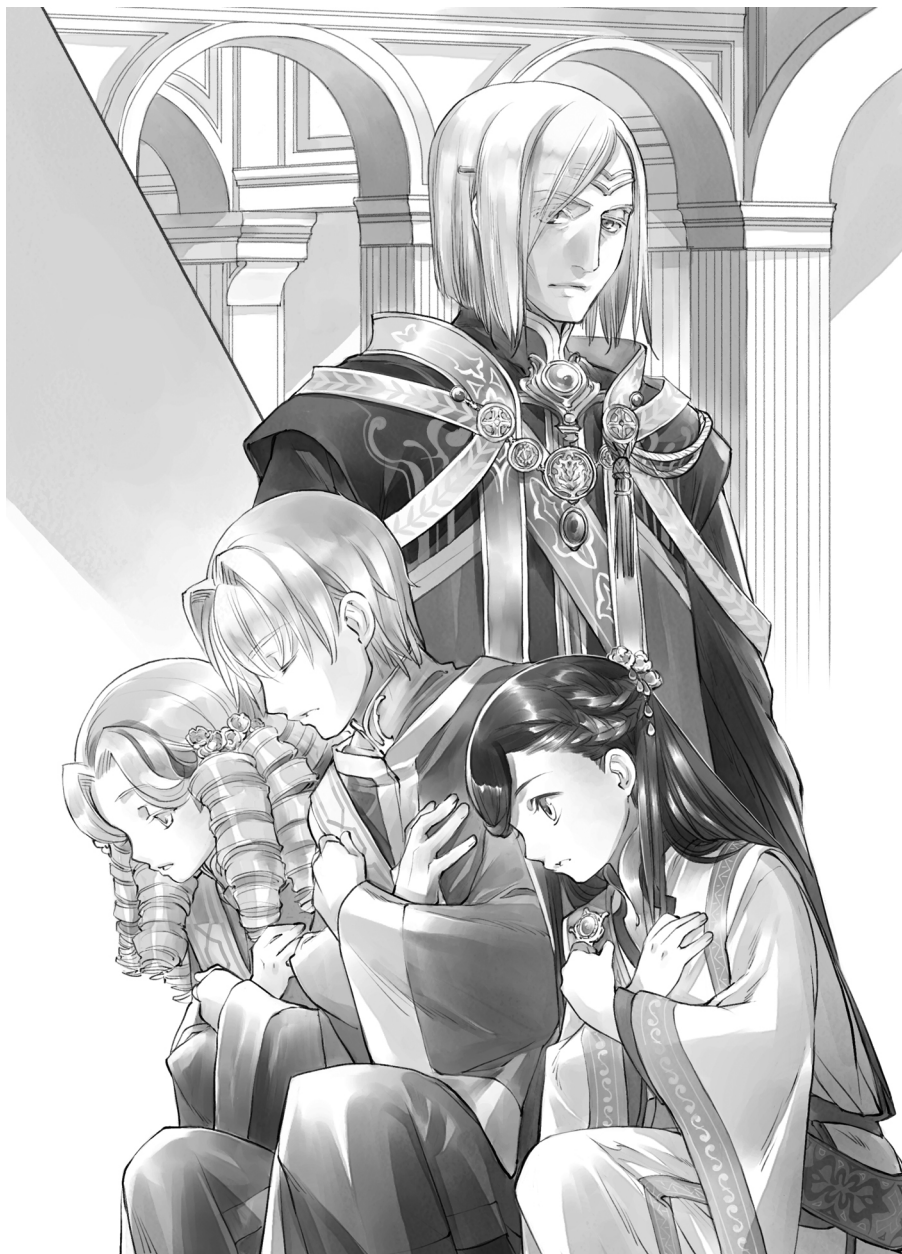
"I understand your impatience, Raublut, but stand down," the king interjected. "Greetings come first."

The Sovereign knight commander clearly wanted to interrogate me, but nobles took formalities very seriously. First-time greetings were the priority.

Dunkelfelger performed their greetings, then those of us from Ehrenfest knelt before the king. I was acting as our duchy's

representative, since I was in charge of our joint research.

“Zent Trauerqual, may I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?”



Just as archdukes and archduchesses were addressed as aubs, it was proper to put “Zent” before the name of a king. After finishing my greeting, I received permission to stand, then took a closer look at Trauerqual. He had silver hair tinged with blue, much like Hildebrand, while his facial features made him resemble Anastasius.

Though he looks extremely unwell and practically reeks of rejuvenation potions...

His obvious exhaustion and the cloy of rejuvenation potions hanging over him immediately brought my first time seeing Ferdinand to mind. They didn’t look very much alike, but when Trauerqual gazed downward, the resemblance was definitely there. Maybe it was their hair being a similar length.

I can tell at a glance that he’s pushing himself extremely hard.

As I continued to examine Trauerqual, he gave me a somewhat contemplative look and then said, “Ehrenfest, I ask for an explanation as to why guard knights cannot enter the ceremonial hall.”

“The reasons are as I described to Prince Hildebrand. I first proposed that the royal family take part because I sincerely believe it is important for you all to experience a true religious ceremony, but I am not trying to force your hand, by any means.”

“Rozemyne!” Anastasius barked. “This is not my villa nor the underground archive. You stand before the king!” He was telling me to dress things up more, like a noble should, but I could only tilt my head in response.

Um... How do you say, “Accept my terms or leave” in noble speech again?

I was planning to give all the mana we gathered to the royal family, so having them participate would make that part more convenient, but we didn’t actually need them. We could do the joint research ourselves—in fact, not having them present would make things a lot easier for us.

As I was mulling over what to say, the Zent waved Anastasius away. “We are the ones who asked to participate in the ceremony. I do not mind as long as those with malice can indeed be removed.”

“I implore you to reconsider, Zent,” came an unfamiliar voice. “I do not believe that a means of identifying those with malice truly exists.”

After seeing how Hildebrand and everyone else had reacted earlier, I wasn’t surprised. Even if the royal family wanted to participate, their guard knights would never allow it. I could just stay silent and wait for them to convince the king.

As I thought that, however, the Sovereign knight commander, Raublut, crossed his arms and looked down at me. “Lady Rozemyne, is

this shield you speak of the translucent dome that appeared during the attack on the Interduchy Tournament last year?"

I nodded in response, seeming to recall just how much my Schutzaria's shield made to protect the students had stood out back then.

Raublut continued, "This is the first time I'm hearing that the shield can detect those with malice, but I can confirm that it is impervious to attacks. The king should be perfectly safe inside it." He had evidently seen the shield somewhere else before.

I stared at the knight commander in wide-eyed surprise. At no point had I expected the very man who knew that Ferdinand was a seed of Adalgisa and who treated everyone from Ehrenfest with suspicion to acknowledge the usefulness of my shield.

"Although your word as the knight commander holds much weight, we cannot act on it alone," one knight said. "At the very least, please allow us to test this shield with our own attacks."

The royal family looked to me for my response. I understood their desire to confirm that the shield worked as suggested.

"If doing that will convince you, then be my guest," I said.

Thus, it was decided that the Sovereign Knight's Order would provide a demonstration for the royal family. Everyone distanced themselves from me, after which I produced a shield just big enough for one person. I wasn't sure how strong the knights' attacks were going to be, so I put my all into maintaining it for the sake of my own safety.

"Go forth, Loyalitat," the king said to his guard knight—the man who had suggested this test to begin with. "Do as you must."

After morphing his schtappe into a sword, Loyalitat started with a noticeably restrained attack; his first blow must have just been to test the waters. He was immediately blown back by a gust of wind.

There were murmurs of surprise—and from there, the other knights started trying to destroy Schutzaria's shield as well, using a variety of weapons. Gradually, more and more joined in, and their attacks became increasingly intense.

Thankfully, I was completely safe inside my shield, channeling my mana like it was nothing. I was genuinely more concerned about the knights, who were getting increasingly wounded as the shield continued to throw them back and deflect their attacks.

"As expected, Lady Rozemyne's shield of Schutzaria is invincible! How absolutely wonderful!"

"I was informed that it blocked an attack from none other than Lord Heissshitze himself. Verily, I am moved to be seeing it with mine own eyes."

Hartmut and Clarissa were trembling with excitement, while the

Dunkelfelger knights were watching with bated breath, thoroughly enjoying this test as they would a game of ditter. I couldn't decide who was worse.

Just how long is this going to continue, I wonder?

No sooner had that thought crossed my mind than Raublut gave an instruction to one of the knights, who then smoothly entered the shield.

"I see," the knight muttered, looking around the inside of the shield with great interest. "Those without malice really can enter." He then turned his schtappe into a weapon. "But what happens if someone attacks from within?"

I didn't know the answer myself, but the brave knight quickly changed that. As it turned out, such a person would be blown from the shield the instant they drew their weapon and tried to begin an attack.

How interesting.

No matter what attacks they tried, how many offensive magic tools they used, or how much mana they fired, everything was repelled by my shield. The knights soon began to lose their will to fight, and it was then that Trauerqual intervened.

"Enough. We have seen what we needed to see. It is inconceivable that such a resilient shield would succumb to mere apprentices of the Royal Academy."

Indeed, we had proven the strength of my shield, but those who had taken part were now in an absolutely terrible state. "Zent Trauerqual, I wish to grant Heilschmerz's healing to those of the Sovereign Knight's Order," I said. "Would you permit me?"

"That would be appreciated, but do you not mind...? They are many in number, so it will require a lot of mana."

"I shall use Flutrane's staff, which will make the expense almost insignificant. We will soon need the knights to guard the auditorium, as I expect the retainers of other duchies to protest as well."

Using my ring would require me to be close enough to the knights that I could touch them. Flutrane's staff didn't have that requirement, *and* it would allow me to heal a bunch of people at once.

After securing the king's permission, I produced Flutrane's staff and granted the knights Heilschmerz's blessing. I then presented the potions we had prepared and attempted to hand them out, saying that I planned to distribute them to the participating nobles.

"You intend to give bottles of strange liquid to other duchies?!" Raublut exclaimed. This wasn't the first time that someone had suspected foul play.

"It is our duty to be cautious," Loyalitat said, "but we need only investigate them ourselves, as we did with the shield. I, myself, do not suspect Lady Rozemyne. Had she mixed something dangerous into her

potions, then she would have given them out before healing us.” He then took one of my rejuvenation potions and downed the entire thing in full view of the other knights and the royal family.

“Well, Loyalitat? Feeling at all sick?”

“The potion is... wonderful. It rejuvenates so tremendously well that I can physically feel my mana recovering. Lady Rozemyne, was it not quite an ordeal to prepare so many rejuvenation potions of this strength?”

“I simply thought that, as we will be receiving so much mana from everyone, it only makes sense to help them recover what they spend. They have endured many hardships already, I am told, given that they were required to play ditto to participate...”

“There are many duchies that will consider these a great aid.”

With that, both Schutzaria’s shield and my rejuvenation potions had been tested—and approved—by the Sovereign Knight’s Order. Better still, Dunkelfelger *and* the royal family had been present to witness it.

Whew. Now we can do the ritual without incident.

After heaving a silent sigh of relief, I parted ways with the Sovereign Knight’s Order and moved to the Farthest Hall.

Dunkelfelger’s archduke candidates, Lestilaut and Hannelore, would not be participating in this Dedication Ritual; as per our agreement, they were going to spectate and nothing more. We were going to be relying on the other duchies for their assistance.

“Those of the royal family, please line up here,” I said. “I will produce Schutzaria’s shield at the entrance to detect anyone with bad intentions. We will then guide the participants ourselves, but they will each need to greet you all. Once those greetings have concluded, please move here, to the center.”

A voice then announced that the participants were gathering in the auditorium, and that everyone was to move to their specified positions.

First to be permitted entry was a Klassenberg archnoble. He saw the lined-up members of the royal family and went rigid with fear.

Buddy, I know exactly how you feel.

“Please do come over and greet them,” I said, urging him to come forward.

He came back to his senses, moved to greet the royal family, then followed Hartmut’s instructions immediately after. The next person came in right away.

The first person to face any resistance from Schutzaria’s shield was an Ahrensbach student, who was abruptly knocked back. As she blinked in confusion, Ehrenfest’s and Dunkelfelger’s apprentice

knights moved to intercept her.

“This is Schutzaria’s shield,” one of the knights said. “It denies entry to all those with malicious intent. My apologies, but as guard knights cannot attend the ritual, we cannot allow those who may pose a threat to go inside.”

“This isn’t right!” the girl cried, glaring daggers at me as the knights took her away. “I’m not malicious in the slightest! It’s Lady Rozemyne! This is all a plot by Lady Rozemyne!”

In the end, two out of the five participating Ahrensbach students were denied entry. Things proceeded smoothly from there, though several students from duchies on the losing side of the civil war had to leave.

“I hold no malice!” they would desperately exclaim... but they were from duchies that had complained about their rank dropping and their lands being ravaged after they lost the civil war. Schutzaria’s shield had rejected them, so they could not enter.

“Perhaps your venom is directed at me rather than the royal family,” I said, trying to frame it as something more innocuous—though the royal family knew better than anyone that the civil war had earned them many enemies. “Either way, I must ask that you sit this one out. We cannot afford to have those who may be a threat in a ceremonial hall without guard knights.”

Once the royal family had been greeted by all of our participants, I directed them to move to the center. I then dismissed Schutzaria’s shield and took a rejuvenation potion from my belt as I moved to the door.

I should probably recover some mana, right? I’ve lost a surprising amount.

Naturally, the Sovereign Knight’s Order was made up of many strong individuals; taking so many of their attacks and then healing them had proven quite taxing. Screening all of the students had taken longer than expected as well. Maintaining the shield really did require a lot of mana.

And now I’m about to make a chalice. Creating a divine instrument takes a hefty chunk of mana, and today’s participants are archnobles and archduke candidates, so there’s going to be a lot of mana being offered, right?

Feeling anxious, I stealthily drank my personal rejuvenation potion, then stood by the door as I waited for my mana to recover. At the time, it hadn’t occurred to me what repercussions this might have.

At the center of the room, Wilfried, Charlotte, and Hartmut were giving an explanation about the ritual. They spoke of various things—that we had formulated a theory that rituals and prayer were important for obtaining divine protection from multiple gods, the

number of protections that Wilfried and I had obtained, the fact that our mana expenditure had gone down as a result, that Dunkelfelger could now earn blessings through a ditter ritual, and that we hoped this ritual would change how everyone thought of the temple and religious ceremonies.

Hopefully this helps to diminish all the bias against temples.

Once the explanations were complete, Hartmut addressed all those in attendance. “The Dedication Ritual shall now begin. Please kneel where you are and place your hands on the red carpet. Then, you will need to repeat the prayer stated by Lady Rozemyne, the High Bishop of Ehrenfest.”

First the royal family, then the participants—who had been sitting as directed—took a knee. Hartmut confirmed that Wilfried and Charlotte were at the edges and adopting the same position, then took out a bell-adorned staff and rang it loudly.

“The High Bishop shall now enter!” he declared.

Right on cue, I made my way from the door to the center of the room and stopped in front of the shrine. I then offered a prayer to the gods while looking at the chalice in Geduldh the Goddess of Earth’s hands, and transformed my schtappe.

“Erdegral.”

It was a spell that I’d read in the underground archive. My schtappe transformed into a chalice without incident, but the feystone was entirely transparent—perhaps because I had been too focused on the shrine. There was now a divine instrument in my hands, but it hadn’t required much of my mana.

Mm... This is a bit unexpected.

Hartmut helped me to set down the chalice, then we knelt and put our hands on the red carpet as well.

“I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world...” I said, beginning the ritual. Everyone repeated after me and offered their mana.

In Ehrenfest, only a few people gathered to perform the Dedication Ritual, but here we had quite a sizable group. As we chanted the prayer together and our mana started to flow, it started to feel as though we had all become one. It elated me in the kind of way that festivals did.

And then, everyone’s mana shot up toward the ceiling in a pillar of light. It was red, the color of Geduldh.

“Wh-What is the meaning of this?!” Trauerqual exclaimed.

“I expect that a portion of our mana flew to some unknown point in the Royal Academy,” I said. “This always happens with rituals done here. It does not happen in Ehrenfest, so I expect it is something unique to the Academy.”

This was the king's first ritual, so it made sense that he'd require a little reassurance. I was sure that Anastasius had already told him about Dunkelfelger's ritual producing a blue pillar of light, but listening to someone else's account of an event was incomparable to seeing it firsthand.

Seeing is believing, as they say.

I watched the light while continuing to channel my mana, but I was soon interrupted by an almost hysterical cry from Charlotte.

"That should be enough, Sister!"

"Everyone, please remove your hands from the floor," I said. "I expect some are beginning to run low on mana."

Things had been going so well. I was actually a little disappointed that Charlotte had called for the ceremony to end... but that feeling quickly faded when I was faced with the aftermath. First, the archnobles from the lesser and middle duchies stumbled forward and collapsed. The archduke candidates stayed in their praying stances, looking sick, and even those of the royal family appeared a little tired.

Charlotte intervened, but I still overdid it!

"Everyone, thank you for participating in the Dedication Ritual," I said. "Those of the royal family and the archduke candidates here today are used to supplying mana to foundational magics, but this must have been especially hard on the archnobles. We have prepared rejuvenation potions to reward those of you who have given us your valuable mana. Hartmut, the potions."

I wanted to speed things along as much as possible, but I still needed to consume a potion myself to prove that they weren't poisoned. Saying something like "Oh, I'm already overflowing with mana" wouldn't be enough to excuse me; it was about as weak as refusing to taste-test your own sweets at a tea party because you're "much too full."

Having no other choice, I drank another potion meant to significantly recover one's mana.

This isn't good...

And I wasn't talking about the taste. The ritual hadn't been as demanding as I'd expected; at this rate, my mana was sure to overflow. I watched with a smile as the king drank a potion and everyone else followed suit, showing surprisingly little resistance, all the while compressing my mana.

The rejuvenation rate of these potions is slower than what I'm used to, so I might be able to act fast enough...

I desperately compressed my swelling mana, wishing that I could share it with the students so exhausted from the ritual that they were having to sit down. However, compression alone was not enough; my mana was growing faster than I could contain it. Cold sweat beaded

on my forehead as I observed Anastasius and Sigiswald place a net with feystones into the chalice.

What should I do?! I can't stop recovering mana!

"Sister, is it just me, or is your bracelet shining?" Charlotte whispered, having stealthily approached me. We were on the cusp of repeating the blessing bomb incident.

"I am recovering too much mana," I whispered back. "Either my charms are going to shine one after another, or I'm going to suddenly give out blessings. I need to expend a large amount of mana at once, but how?"

Charlotte looked at the royal family, who were peering at the feystones within the chalice, then at the students, then at my bracelet. "Perhaps you could bless everyone with healing. That would be a fairly natural way to expend your mana."

I went with her brilliant idea immediately. If my mana was going to overflow and turn into a blessing bomb anyway, then I was better off taking the initiative. Rather than making an unexpected scene, I would make it clear that I intended to heal everyone.

But how do I go about this, exactly?

The best approach would be to produce Flutrane's staff and heal everyone at once, but I still had the chalice out. Not to mention, it was still packed with mana; I was pretty confident that the feystones hadn't finished absorbing it all.

I can't make the chalice go away, but trying to heal people one at a time with my ring would take too long. I need Flutrane's staff so that I can expend all of my built-up mana at once.

"I wish to produce Flutrane's staff separately from the chalice," I said.

"Is such a thing even possible?" Charlotte asked.

Surely it was, especially now that I was overflowing with mana. The old sovereign's record had mentioned producing the divine shield and spear at the same time, and I'd once seen Ferdinand produce several shields of Wind.

Besides, I don't really have a choice. Inaction would only result in my feystones lighting up in front of the royal family and all these archduke candidates, then a blessing would pop out. I need to expend my mana naturally. Do your best, me.

I opened and closed my fist, gathering my mana. It was recovering steadily because of the potions I'd imbibed, so time really was of the essence.

Another one of my charms began to shine.

Gaaah! Not another one! This is bad! So bad! Come, schtappe! Make another instrument right away! Even apprentice knights can use weapons and shields at the same time! I don't know how it's done, but it must be

possible!

My desperate plea must have reached the gods, as another schtappe suddenly appeared in my right hand. At the same time, one of the feystones on my bracelet stopped shining.

Charlotte inhaled sharply.

“It seems to be time, so if you’ll excuse me...” I moved away from Charlotte and stood in front of everyone to make my announcement. “Your mana is recovering but not your stamina, correct? My mana has recovered as well, but I would not want you all to be stuck sitting on the floor, so...”

I produced my schtappe and chanted, “*Streitkolben*” to produce Flutrane’s staff.

“I must rely on Flutrane’s staff to heal so many people at once,” I continued with a smile, trying to sidestep the issue of my mana. “My inexperience is a great source of embarrassment.”

I really was telling the truth about my embarrassment; I hadn’t been able to judge how much mana I needed for the ritual.

“May Heilschmerz’s healing be granted,” I said.

I prayed while putting my absolute all into channeling my mana... and soon enough, green light overflowed from Flutrane’s staff. Light shot up into the air just as it had during the Dedication Ritual, and the rest of the mana rained down on all those gathered. Heilschmerz’s healing didn’t actually do much to alleviate exhaustion, to my knowledge, but I didn’t care about that; my top priority was expending my mana.

With that, I’d granted everyone healing. Gone was the threat of my feystones shining obnoxiously in front of everyone and a blessing bomb detonating out of nowhere again.

I got into a real panic over all this, but now that it’s over, everything feels... fine? The phrase “all’s well that ends well” was made for times like this. I wiped the sweat from my brow. Ferdinand, I’ve become a schtappe dual-wielder! Hopefully one day I’ll be able to make a ton of schtappes, just like you!

I could feel the satisfaction of now being even a step closer to my mentor. Clearly the best move here would be to inform him by letter and receive a showering of praise.

It was possible that the downed archnobles from lesser and middle duchies had gotten hurt when so much of their mana was sucked out of them. Still, although Heilschmerz’s healing didn’t do much to ease their exhaustion, it at least allowed them to get back on their knees.

I was just beginning to think how this differed from the time I’d healed Elvira in Haldenzel when I heard someone mumble, “Mestionora...”

“I concur, Lady Hannelore!” Clarissa exclaimed, her fists clenched

passionately. "I received exactly the same impression! Lady Rozemyne's actions clearly parallel Mestionora, who was permitted by the gods to use all of their instruments!" She was on the verge of another long-winded speech, but I wasn't sure that I agreed.

Hartmut looked similarly doubtful. "I do not seem to recall such an idea being expressed in the temple's bible..."

"It is spoken of within old Dunkelfelger books."

"Mestionora is said to be the daughter of the God of Life and Goddess of Earth, is she not?" Eglantine suddenly added in agreement. "Some old books in Klassenberg say the same. To hide from the God of Life, she received hair as dark as the night sky from the God of Darkness, and golden eyes from the Goddess of Light. She then became the subordinate of Wind, the strongest defense of all the gods..." She gave a teasing smile. "Indeed, Mestionora is just like Lady Rozemyne."

I had absolutely no idea how to respond.

"I speak in jest, of course," she said. "Please do not look so troubled."

"Anyone would be troubled to be compared to a goddess, Lady Eglantine..." I replied. How was I supposed to react to a member of the royal family—one so often mentioned in the same breath as the Goddess of Light, no less—comparing me to Mestionora?

Hartmut smoothly stepped forward. "I had no idea that such a tale existed... I find it fascinating beyond words and would certainly like to read it myself."

After expressing his thanks, Hartmut brought the event to a swift close. I'd genuinely expected him to join Clarissa in freaking out and causing a fuss—a hasty conclusion that I was now ashamed of. From the bottom of my heart, I was grateful to have someone so competent on my side.

Using the Rest of the Mana

“That should do,” Anastasius said.

The feystone-filled net was pulled out of the chalice with a wet *plop*. After absorbing the mana, the previously transparent feystones had turned red, the color of the chalice. Anastasius held them up to show everyone.

“We intend to use the mana gathered from this ritual to enrich Yurgenschmidt in its entirety.”

“Each and every one of you has my sincerest gratitude,” the king added.

There were many small, proud smiles among the crowd. Some of the students had given so much mana that they had ended up collapsing in front of the royal family. Partly to apologize to them and thank them for their efforts, I decided to reveal some information.

“What I am about to say will be made public during the Interduchy Tournament, but I shall tell those of you who participated now. Our research thus far has shown that, to obtain divine protections, one should pray when supplying mana to one’s foundational magic, as well as before and after putting one’s all into things such as brewing or training. This is made even more effective by channeling mana into a protective feystone engraved with the sigil of the god whose divine protection one wishes to obtain.”

I turned to Hannelore, who smiled and showed the Dregarnuhr charm on her wrist. She had apparently received it from one of her attendants.

The apprentice scholars looked at the charm with bright eyes; unlike the archduke candidates, they lacked chances to pray to their foundational magic. “In that case, we can pray without going to the temple,” one said.

I would have liked to change their opinion on the temple, but getting them used to prayer came first. Perhaps adults would see the god-worshipping temple more favorably when their children started to earn divine protections.

“You say that one can earn more divine protections through prayer, but I have already performed the ceremony for divine protections,” Ortwin said. “Praying now will not earn me any more.”

He wasn’t alone; most of our participants had already completed the ritual, and their looks of optimism quickly faded.

The king raised a hand, seizing the attention of everyone present, and then said in a collected tone: “In that case, I would suggest granting those who are gathered the right to repeat the ceremony after their graduation. This will allow us to confirm the accuracy of Dunkelfelger and Ehrenfest’s research.”

Everyone’s expressions lit up. Ortwin seemed motivated as well. Many of the students had years until their graduation; I was confident that, if they prayed seriously, many of them would obtain new protections.

“Naturally, the sixth-years will find themselves at a disadvantage,” I said, “but know this: Aub Ehrenfest obtained the divine protections of Liebeskhilfe the Goddess of Binding and Glucklitat the God of Trials after just a year of prayer, then wonderfully obtained a first wife from a duchy of a higher rank than his own. You would all do well to offer your prayers and mana to the gods while striving toward whatever you may desire.”

Leaking the divine protections that Sylvester had obtained earned me a few giggles. Hopefully that would make people see him in a better light.

So much of what happened today wasn’t according to plan, but I’m glad everything ended safely.

As I watched everyone leave the Farthest Hall, looking satisfied, I clenched and unclenched my fist, confirming that my mana really had settled down. I seemed to be in the clear.

“Rozemyne, explain how in the world you produced two divine instruments at once,” Anastasius asked as the participants were replaced with Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger students coming in to clean up. The other members of the royal family were silently urging me as well, but I just knew that they wouldn’t believe the truth: that I had completely winged it.

“You ask for an explanation, but I do not believe the process is that unusual,” I replied. “Even apprentice knights can use a weapon and a shield at the same time.”

“Yes, but only after taking the knight course. You have done no such thing.”

Oh yeah...

“My predecessors were simply inspiring,” I said with a smile. “The record of an old sovereign in the underground archive mentioned the spear and shield being used at the same time, and I have seen someone produce multiple shields of Wind at once.”

Anastasius grimaced, evidently displeased with my answer.

“So the weapons and shields used by knights are the same as divine instruments to you?” Sigiswald asked. He was wearing a calm smile, but his features were noticeably stiff.

“The spell is the same, so yes, that is my opinion.”

“Lady Rozemyne... you certainly have a perspective unique to the rest of us,” Adolphine remarked. Both she and Eglantine seemed rather unsettled, and not in a good way. It was probably best that I not say anything I didn’t need to.

“Still, the healing was necessary, was it not?” I asked. “Collapsing in front of the royal family and not even being able to kneel is seen as a serious blunder. I could not have left the archnobles in that condition.” I’d needed to prevent them from thinking that they’d shamed themselves, and the blessing had clearly made the archduke candidates and those of the royal family feel better. In other words, it hadn’t been a waste. “Furthermore, I wished to grant healing to the Zent.”

“To Father?”

“Although this is my first time meeting him, I can tell that he is pushing himself beyond the limits of what is healthy...”

The king may have resembled Anastasius in appearance, but his exhausted demeanor and the sickly sweet scent of rejuvenation potions that hung in the air around him kept making me think of Ferdinand. I was aware that they didn’t want my sympathy, but things had to be bad if not even his standard noble poker face was enough to keep his true feelings hidden. My concern was entirely justified.

“It did ease our burden, yes,” the king said. “I express my thanks.”

“I am honored to have been of use to the Zent.”

I’d wanted to add, “Be sure to eat, and get enough sleep each and every night” but I stopped myself. That was a sign of growth, surely.

“Putting that aside, what should we do with the mana left in the chalice?” Anastasius asked, shooting a glance at it. The royal family hadn’t brought enough empty feystones to absorb it all—understandably so, as I’d stealthily added more to blow off some steam.

“I cannot keep the chalice formed forever, and we declared that it would all be offered to the royal family... so I believe we should use it for the sake of everyone at the Royal Academy.”

“Oh? Do you have something splendid in mind, Lady Rozemyne?” Adolphine asked, watching me closely, her amber eyes betraying her interest. Eglantine looked equally as absorbed.

“Let us give it to the library,” I said. “In the past, it depended on the mana of three archscholars and several medscholars, but for the past several years, Professor Solange, a lone mednoble, was managing everything herself. Even the preservation magic has worn off from the archives, and the rotting of valuable documents has created a lot of extra work.”

Hortensia, the Sovereign knight commander’s first wife, was

apparently doing her best to maintain things, but they still were two archnobles short. I couldn't help them either, both due to an order from Sigiswald and because I needed to avoid registering with Schwartz and Weiss.

"I request your permission to use the mana to preserve those valuable documents, and to enter the library myself," I concluded.

The king thought for a moment, then nodded—perhaps because the royal family now knew about the underground archive, which was absolutely of use to them. "Very well. The remaining mana may be used for the library. We cannot all go there at once, so Anastasius, Eglantine, I ask that you see it done."

"Understood."

"I leave the rest to the both of you. We will excuse ourselves first."

With that, the royal family and the Sovereign Knight's Order filed out of the room. The cleanup could not proceed while the king was present, so he had probably acted out of consideration. We all knelt as we saw him off, then began discussing our immediate plans.

"One moment, Anastasius," Eglantine said. "I will send an ordonnanz to the library to inform them."

"Yes, thank you," Anastasius replied, flashing her a sweet smile. It must have been a look reserved exclusively for his wife, as he had returned to his usual expression when he turned to me. "Hannelore will come with us as Dunkelfelger's representative. You will need to see this done as well, I expect."

Hannelore flinched upon hearing her name. "W-Wait, I'm going with you? Should it not be my brother...?"

Lestilaut briskly waved away the suggestion. "It is better that you go, as you have already been entrusted with one of the keys. I will stay here and oversee the cleanup as Dunkelfelger's supervisor."

Hannelore nodded and began selecting retainers to accompany her. I turned to my own retainers and did the same.

"Matthias, Laurenz—you two carry the chalice. The rest of my apprentice knights will accompany me as guards. Rihyarda, Brunhilde—you will be my attendants. Lieseleta, Gretia, and the apprentice scholars shall stay here and assist Hartmut."

"Understood."

My retainers here at the Royal Academy all nodded in response, while Hartmut alone looked at me in shock. "Lady Rozemyne, I would very much like to go as well," he said.

"Oh, but you are the High Priest, granted entry only to manage the tools needed for the ritual. We cannot allow you to simply wander the grounds at your leisure. Not to mention... you have so little time to spend with Clarissa; this is an excellent opportunity for you to

speak with her.”

I was trying to be considerate, but Hartmut looked exceedingly disappointed for some reason. We were going to be channeling mana into the library, not performing a ritual, so I wanted him to focus on cleaning.

“Wilfried, I would like you to stay here as well and represent Ehrenfest,” I said. “Once everything is finished, send word to Prince Hildebrand and have him shut the door.”

“Got it.”

And so, I started making my way to the library, leaving the cleaning to Wilfried and Charlotte. I couldn’t walk very fast, as always, but I did my best to avoid falling too far behind Hannelore’s group.

“There was excess mana from the Dedication Ritual, so we received permission from the Zent to use it for the library,” I explained upon our arrival, having brought the chalice with me.

Hortensia and Solange enthusiastically welcomed us inside; it seemed that the library’s mana shortage was severe indeed.

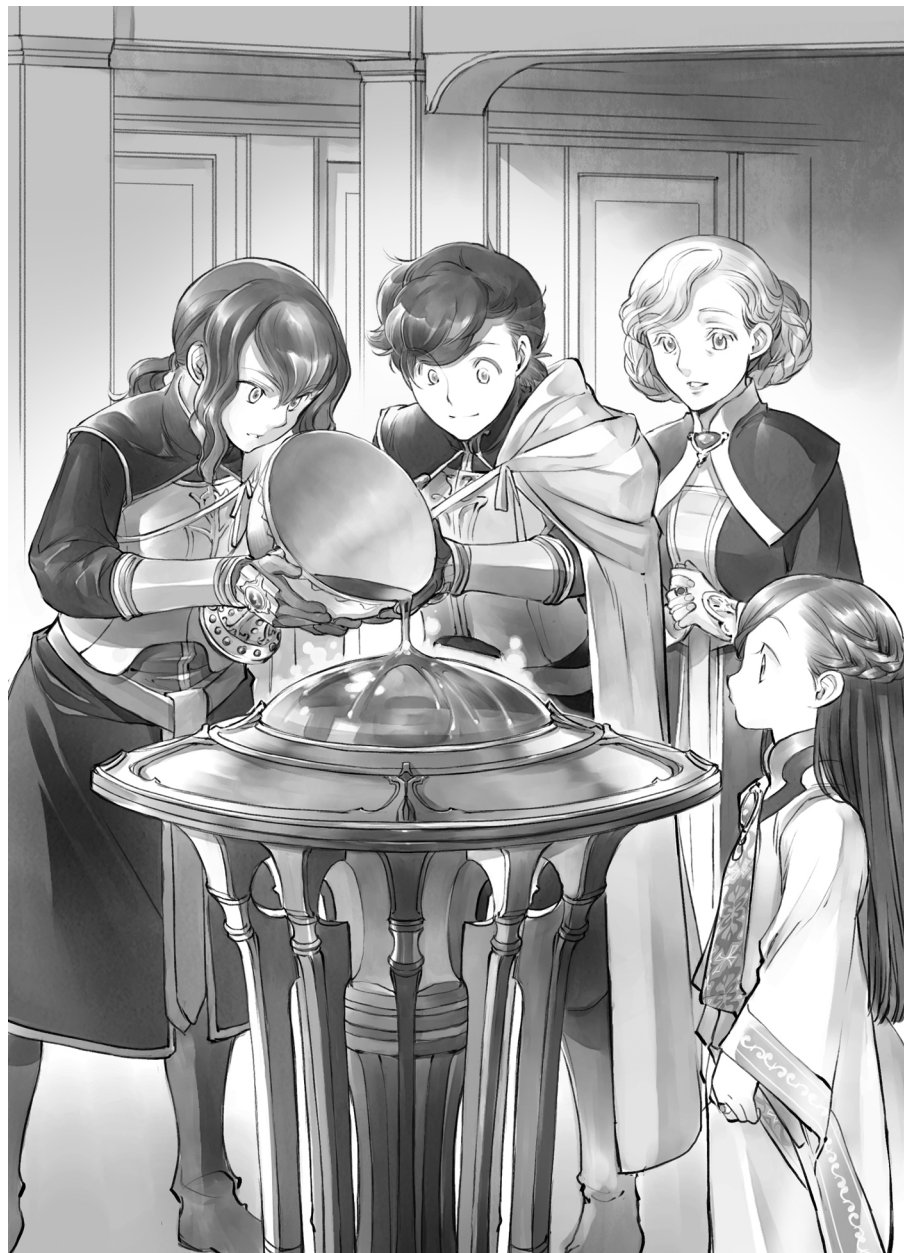
“If possible, use the mana on this magic tool,” Hortensia said. “I understand it as being the most important tool for the library’s operation, but my mana alone is not enough for it.”

As it turned out, Raimund had asked Hortensia all sorts of questions about what kind of magic tools were in the library. She had only recently been assigned here, however, and she still wasn’t very well informed, so the two of them had started investigating the library’s construction and magic tools. Meanwhile, Solange, Schwartz, and Weiss oversaw the daily operations.

“After looking into the library’s mana requirements and reading the diaries of past librarians, we deduced that this magic tool, abandoned since the departure of the previous archlibrarians, is more important than any other. After calculating how much mana remains in the tool, we realized that it might run out within one year. We were planning to discuss this matter with the royal family as soon as possible—tomorrow, even, if we were so lucky.”

“Then let us pour the mana in now,” I said.

Hortensia directed my retainers as they brought in the chalice, then Matthias and Laurenz slowly poured the red liquid that was inside onto the massive feystone atop the tool, covering it completely. None of the liquid spilled onto the ground; it was all quickly absorbed.



Soon, the almost transparent feystone slowly became a veritable rainbow of colors. The mana we had poured onto it had been red, so this didn't really make sense to me, but I didn't expect an explanation.

Hortensia sighed in relief. "The color is returning! I tried so hard to refill the magic tool myself, but no matter how much mana I channeled into it, nothing seemed to change. I truly had started to fear that it would cease operating during my tenure, but now... I am so very thankful."

Solange was also glad. She noted that, with the magic tool replenished, she could finally relax again.

"During today's Dedication Ritual, we received the assistance of not only archnobles and archduke candidates, but members of the royal family as well. That is why we had so much mana," I explained. "I am glad that we have been able to use some of that to assist you."

Anastasius and Eglantine checked that the chalice no longer contained any mana, then gave brisk nods, signaling that it was safe for me to unform it. I was pleased to have helped the library, despite how unexpected it had been.

As we went to leave, Schwartz and Weiss hopped over merrily.

"Milady. Lots of mana."

"Gramps very happy."

By "milady" they were referring to Hortensia, so she must have been working very hard for the library's sake. I was genuinely moved to hear that.

"Schwartz and Weiss are glad to have received your mana as well, Professor Hortensia," I said.

"Oh, well, considering how much mana the library requires, my contribution is almost inconsequential," Hortensia replied. She was speaking humbly, of course, since we were in the presence of royals.

I smiled at Hortensia, and she smiled in turn. Anyone who was willing to work hard for the library was a good person in my book.

"More importantly, who is this 'gramps'?" Anastasius asked, intruding into our pleasant conversation.

Hortensia and Solange exchanged looks, wary of the prince's scrutinous eyes. They didn't have an answer that would appease the royal family, it seemed... but in their place, Schwartz and Weiss spoke up.

"Gramps is gramps."

"He is old. Powerful."

It was exactly the same answer that I'd once received, and no more comprehensible—though their flopping ears certainly were cute. I gazed up at Anastasius and Eglantine, wondering whether the royal family had any ideas, but they both seemed just as unsure.

“What was that supposed to mean...?” Anastasius asked the librarians; he had presumably concluded that there was no point questioning the shumils.

Hortensia and Solange both looked troubled.

“Professor Solange, you said it might be a magic tool even older than Schwartz and Weiss, right?” I asked.

“Indeed,” she replied with a nod, “but that was only speculation. I thought it might be a named magic tool, like Schwartz and Weiss, but none of the documentation we have mentions such a nickname. At present, we cannot tell what purpose the magic tool might serve or whether it even exists in the first place.”

According to Solange, the register that listed all of the library’s magic tools omitted nicknames and such to avoid any confusion when they fell out of use.

“Is that so?” I mused aloud. “But in the diary I borrowed, Schwartz and Weiss were referred to by name...”

“Yes, but that was a personal effect, not an official document to be stored publicly.” It seemed that most diaries weren’t left behind for long.

Hortensia looked upward, perhaps searching her memories of the documents she had read while looking through the magic tools. “I personally investigated the library’s magic tools and can confirm that no ‘gramps’ was mentioned. However, we do know that it was pleased by this tool being refilled, so perhaps the tool *is* gramps.”

“I see. What does it do, exactly?”

“One could call it the very foundation of the library. There is no mistaking that it was created at a time before even Schwartz and Weiss.”

“As a foundation, it must be an old and powerful magic tool,” Anastasius said with a nod, completely satisfied. He then went to leave, but I called out to him first.

“Prince Anastasius, when will we next be going to the underground archive? You must inform us in advance so that the library can prepare.” I was only here today because the king had granted me his permission, so it made sense that I was eagerly awaiting our next visit.

Anastasius’s brow twitched a bit, then he casually replied that there were no plans for us to go there again.

“Why not? If today’s ritual helped you to understand the importance of religious ceremonies and divine protections, then shouldn’t investigating the archive filled with valuable documents be your highest priority?”

Part of my rationale for getting the royal family involved in all this had been to quell everyone’s dissatisfaction, but that wasn’t my

true objective. I'd wanted them to learn the importance of ceremonies and then be like "Wow, we've gotta investigate all the documents in the underground library right away!"

And the ritual went so well too... Was there a mistake in my expert calculations?!

"We are going to be busy for the near future," Anastasius said. "We must enrich Yurgenschmidt with the mana we have received."

It was only natural that this sudden offering of mana would make the royal family very busy, and the king's sickly appearance was enough for me to gather that he valued supplying the country over reading documents. They no doubt wanted to get through all the mana and then take a breather instead of poking through an old archive.

NOOOOOO! There really was an error! A critical one!

My master plan to make the royal family want more frequent archive visits was turning to dust before my very eyes.

"But the Zent gave me his permission to come to the library..."

"And here you are. Father said nothing of going to that archive today or of scheduling a date."

I failed to get proper assurance! I made it all this way and then fell at the final hurdle! Gahhh, I suck!

Seeing me get depressed, Eglantine gave a kind smile. "As you suggest, Lady Rozemyne, looking over the old records is very important... but supplying mana to magic tools and divine instruments will have an enormous impact on next year's harvest. Thus, we must hurry and act as soon as we can, before spring comes. Have patience for now."

"As you wish."

Despite my crippling disappointment, I was a High Bishop; I understood the importance of the winter Dedication Ritual. I wanted to go back into the archive—I really, really did—but I had no choice but to wait.

"Rozemyne, do you not treat Eglantine with far more respect than you treat me?" Anastasius asked pointedly.

"Not at all. Were the royal family entrusting the divine ceremonies to the Sovereign temple, I would want you to prioritize checking the documents in the archive. But if you are supplying the mana yourselves, then, as a High Bishop, I can hardly interfere."

I was sure that I could endure a little longer without the archive. I didn't have a choice anyway, since I needed their permission to go inside.

"There will come a time when we must enter the archive again," Anastasius said. "Until then, push it from your mind, act only as is necessary, and focus on preparing to make your research public. Is

that understood, Ehrenfest? And you, Dunkelfelger.”

Hannelore recoiled at being dragged into the conversation so suddenly.

“Many will have seen the pillar of light during today’s ritual,” he continued. “We are in no position to deal with the many concerns and complaints that will surely follow, so, Dunkelfelger, address them in our stead. I expect you have the leeway.”

Hannelore shrank into herself and politely replied, “Understood.” It was so sad to think that even though the apprentice knights were the ones playing ditto, Hannelore would be the one rebuked.

“I will return to the auditorium with you to see whether they have finished cleaning up,” Anastasius said. And with that, we made our way out of the library.

“They seem to be finished,” Anastasius said.

Clarissa and my retainers were the only ones remaining in the auditorium. Even from some distance away, I could see that Hartmut and Clarissa were passionately raving to each other, while my retainers were watching from afar.

Hartmut had been granted special permission to participate in today’s ritual as a High Priest, but that didn’t change the fact that he wouldn’t have been allowed here at the Royal Academy under normal circumstances. Even though he was engaged to Clarissa, it seemed that my retainers didn’t feel comfortable leaving him alone with her.

Though it’s clear as day how much they want to leave.

Lieseleta, who was the first to notice our arrival, came over to give us an update. “After finishing the cleanup, we contacted Prince Hildebrand, who came and closed the door to the Farthest Hall for us. The others were dispersed so that Hartmut could speak without being disturbed, which is why only Lady Rozemyne’s retainers remain.”

“My apologies for leaving such a difficult job to you all,” I replied. Hartmut was an archnoble, while the other retainers I’d tasked with cleaning were laynobles and mednobles; none of them were in any position to stop the overzealous couple.

Maybe I should have left Rihyarda here as well...

As I was lost in thought, Anastasius looked down at me and muttered, “Then our job is done.” He then gave Eglantine a soft smile, extended a hand to her, and said, “Let us return, Eglantine.”

“Yes, Anastasius.”

And so, the two royals briskly returned to their villa. Anastasius seemed pleased as he escorted Eglantine.

Once the happy newlyweds were gone, I turned to Hartmut and Clarissa, who were still very much off in their own world. “Hartmut, Clarissa, it pains me greatly to separate a couple waxing romantic, but

sixth bell will soon ring. Let us return to our dorms.”

They both snapped back to reality and turned to look at me.

“Lady Rozemyne... Very well. It seems that will be all for today, Clarissa.”

“But, Hartmut... I wished to speak with you even longer,” Clarissa said, gripping his sleeve and gazing at him intently, her blue eyes wet with tears. They really were like two lovers loath to separate.

Hartmut gave Clarissa a truly regretful smile. “I feel the same way. Never have I had such a wonderful time extolling Lady Rozemyne’s virtues with another.”

As they gazed into one another’s eyes, I could tell that they were in their own little world once again. Hartmut’s disappointment at having not been allowed to accompany me to the library was nowhere to be seen. I really wasn’t sure what to do—but then Hannelore turned to Cordula and called out her name.

Cordula quietly said, “In that case, if you will excuse me...” and stepped forward. “Clarissa, if you continue this, then you will become Ewigeliebe upon losing Erwaermen.”

In an instant, Clarissa released Hartmut’s sleeve and hurried to the very back of Hannelore’s group of retainers. I could only blink in surprise at her sudden change.

Hannelore smiled. “My sincerest apologies for Clarissa, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Oh, no; it was I who caused you trouble.”

We promised to meet again soon to discuss the Interduchy Tournament announcements, then went our separate ways and returned to our dormitories.

Tea Parties and Negotiations

“Hartmut,” I said, “if you do not hurry back to Ehrenfest, sixth bell will ring.”

In general, sixth bell marked the end of the workday. There were knights on duty at the teleportation hall at all times in case of emergencies, but after they clocked out, they wouldn’t do anything for us without very good reason or an order from the aub. This was especially troubling because Hartmut, an adult and the Ehrenfest High Priest, was permitted to be in the Royal Academy only for the day of the ritual. He needed to leave in time, or else he would be soundly punished.

I forced Hartmut, still in his High Priest robes, into the teleportation hall, alongside a wagon stuffed with boxes and the like.

“Please inform Sylvester that we will send our cleaned ceremonial robes at a later date,” I said to Hartmut. “Also, be sure to *personally* deliver a report on today’s ceremony.”

“Understood.”

Things had started to get busier, but Hartmut safely managed to teleport away in time. Sixth bell rang as I saw him off, then I returned to my room.

“It’s time for dinner, Lady Rozemyne,” Lieselea said. “Let us get you changed.” She and Gretia wasted no time undressing me and putting me in the normal clothes I wore around the Royal Academy.

As I arrived at the dining hall, I found that Wilfried and Charlotte were already eating. “You took a while, Rozemyne,” said the former.

“We just supplied mana to the library’s foundational magic tool,” I replied, “but it was located somewhere that students cannot usually reach, quite out of the way. Still, it was fun. There were many magic tools there.” I intended to make note of any beneficial ones mentioned in Raimund’s report and incorporate them into my own library. “How did the cleaning go?”

“Let’s see... What to say...?” Wilfried mused aloud. “Ah, right. Lord Lestilaut requested a tea party. We need to finalize our research, including the parts related to today’s ceremony, and decide how we’re going to present it all during the Interduchy Tournament.”

I’d made a similar promise with Hannelore. I looked around at my attendants, wondering when would be a good time—and it was then that Charlotte started to giggle.

“Sister, Wilfried and Lord Lestilaut actually—”

“Charlotte!” Wilfried snapped, sounding a little hysterical. He was acting a lot like one of my childhood friends from my Urano days; I’d found his stash of dirty books, and he’d desperately tried everything in his power to keep his mom from finding out about them.

“Come on then, Wilfried,” I said. “Tell me where you were hiding them. I wouldn’t recommend under your bed; that’s far too predictable.”

“Uh, what are you talking about...?”

After blinking at Wilfried, surprised at his surprise, I turned to Charlotte for an explanation.

“There is no reason to hide it, Brother. In fact, it *must* be reported. Sister, Lord Lestilaut is going to bring several of the illustrations he has drawn to our next tea party. He has asked that you buy whichever ones you find most suitable for *A Ditter Story*. It seems that he wishes to read a ‘complete’ version of the book as soon as possible.”

Wilfried met Charlotte’s remarks with a slight frown. “I’ve been looking forward to it, since Lord Lestilaut told me his illustrations have turned out really heroic and all that, but I was going to wait a bit before telling Rozemyne. She just doesn’t understand the hearts of men like us. Also, once the tea party becomes the subject of conversation, you’ll hear about it from your attendants anyway.”

I was overwhelmed with the urge to sigh. “Wilfried, the actual transaction may take place here in the Royal Academy, but the payment will not come from the dormitory’s funds. Instead, it will come either from my own money or from that set aside for the printing industry.”

“Hm?”

“We need to correspond with Ehrenfest to decide which budget the funds will come from—and communication by letter takes time.”

I’d written to Elvira as soon as we’d confirmed that we were buying illustrations from Lestilaut, but we’d yet to come to an agreement. First of all, our choice would depend on whether we could use Lestilaut’s illustrations in our books. If we couldn’t, then I would purchase them with my own money and print only a few copies specifically for Dunkelfelger. If we could, then we would use the printing industry’s funds and distribute the books more widely.

Of course, in the latter scenario, we would need Elvira’s permission.

“Book-related payments always seem to come from you, so I didn’t even realize...” Wilfried said.

Now that Ferdinand was gone, Hartmut was overseeing my finances. Although I might have money to throw around, I never had any on hand.

“Indeed,” I replied. “That is why you must give proper reports at all times.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing that from you, of all people... You need to do the same, you know. Like today—that wide-scale healing thing wasn’t part of the plan. I assume you’re going to explain your reasoning to Father. You have to give a *proper report*, after all.”

I slumped my shoulders. In an unexpected twist, my own lecture had come back to bite me.

After sending my report to Ehrenfest, I ended up bedridden with a fever.

Plans for the upcoming tea party were gradually decided in my absence. Even from my bed, I tried to find out what was going on and what the budget was looking like, but Rihyarda just gave me a look of exasperation.

“Milady, focus on getting better before the tea party with Dunkelfelger.”

Brunhilde nodded. “It was wise not to schedule any tea parties for immediately after the ritual.”

They continued to observe my health carefully, assisting with preparations for the tea party all the while. In the meantime, Philine and Muriella came with a report.

“Money has arrived from Lady Elvira,” Philine said. “It seems to be your own funds, Lady Rozemyne. We can use this to buy Lord Lestilaut’s illustrations.”

If the illustrations were of a high enough quality, then our printing officials would simply buy them from us.

“For now, Lady Rozemyne, rest and recover.”

It was only two days before I could move again; my fevers were much shorter now than before. It was reassuring to know that my health truly was getting better—and on that positive note, I went to the dining hall to eat, then moved to the common room to find out what I had missed.

“Wilfried and I were invited to Professor Gundolf’s laboratory while you were bedridden, Sister,” Charlotte began. “Everyone from Drewanchel is very serious about obtaining divine protections.”

“Right. I don’t think any other duchy has every single one of its students preparing charms,” Wilfried added, a serious look in his eyes.

“I see that Drewanchel more than deserves its position as a greater duchy,” I said. It was impressive that they had distributed charms to all of their students within two days—or at least given them the ingredients they needed to make their own.

“Yeah. Ehrenfest knew all this before them, but none of our

students made charms marked with the sigils of the gods. Our apprentice scholars who experienced the same ritual didn't even take the initiative to make charms to give out. There's a pretty clear gap between our duchies."

To be clear, the only Ehrenfest apprentice scholars to have participated in the Dedication Ritual were those serving Wilfried and Charlotte. My apprentice scholars were all mednobles and laynobles, so they hadn't been able to join.

"As we speak, Ignaz and Marianne are making charms in the brewing room," Wilfried continued. He then lowered his voice to a whisper and said, "To be honest, I've been feeling a little down about it all. We had the intelligence before anyone else and still couldn't use it well. I'm not leading my duchy as well as Ortwin, even though we're the same age."

Charlotte tried to console him by saying that such skills were far from easy to master. Then she continued, "I have plans for a tea party with a middle-ranking duchy tomorrow. There, I will see what other duchies thought of this event. You and Sister can focus on the tea party with Dunkelfelger."

I nodded in response.

And so came the day of our tea party with Dunkelfelger. Wilfried and I went to their tea party room at the agreed time, exchanged greetings with Lestilaut and Hannelore, then took the seats we were offered. Everything was proceeding normally... that is, until Lestilaut gave his retainers some kind of signal.

"Now, have a look at these."

"Brother, your illustrations can wait until after we have discussed the research and—"

"We will only be able to focus once this matter has been dealt with," Lestilaut replied, waving away Hannelore's attempted protest. He then got one of his apprentice scholars to spread ten or so illustrations on the table, positioned so that Wilfried and I could see them in all their monochrome glory. "As I was unaware of what degree of black-and-white contrast you would prefer, I determined it best that you decide yourself. Pick whichever ones will suit the book most."

My favorite was a close-up illustration of a knight atop their highbeast, brandishing their weapon; it was so evocative that I could practically hear the fluttering of the cape. Lestilaut had presumably adopted a thing or two from Wilma's artwork, as his lines were well organized and nicely suited our preferred black-and-white style. However, while Wilma's work was kind and gentle, Lestilaut's was particularly energetic, befitting a battle over treasure.

To be honest... I underestimated Lord Lestilaut's art skills.

I should have known that he was an excellent illustrator; after all, he'd been particularly vocal about his talents instead of merely saying that art was something he "dabbled in" or what have you. He truly was on a whole other level.

"Very impressive," I said, peering down at the illustrations. "These are even better than I imagined."

"These are wonderful, Lord Lestilaut!" Wilfried exclaimed soon after, his dark-green eyes sparkling with admiration and respect. "With such amazing illustrations, we can make *A Ditter Story* even more enjoyable. Do you not agree, Rozemyne?"

"I certainly do; they *are* wonderful. However, I should make one thing clear: as we will need to use a process known as stenciling to prepare these illustrations for print, their atmosphere is sure to change, even if only a little. Can we confirm that you understand this, Lord Lestilaut?"

Lestilaut knit his brows. "What do you mean, their atmosphere will change...?"

"I cannot say any more for fear of revealing our technique, but at some point during the printing process, your art will need to be altered by another."

Upon hearing this, Lestilaut grimaced. As a pure-blooded artist, he must have found the very thought of someone else touching his work offensive. "I can perform that part of the process myself," he said.

"That would make you privy to our method, so I must refuse. The current plan is for us to purchase the illustrations and then print them ourselves. If you cannot accept others making amendments to your work, then we will not be able to buy it."

No matter who bought the illustrations, in the end, we were going to do the stenciling in an Ehrenfest workshop. Putting aside cases when people wed into our duchy or started serving our archducal family, I wasn't going to allow those from other duchies to do any of the cutting. That was doubly the case for the archduke candidate of a greater duchy like Lestilaut.

My declaration received a panicked response—not from Lestilaut, however, but from Wilfried.

"Hold on, Rozemyne. We won't get illustrations this good anywhere else! We need to buy these to make *A Ditter Story* as good as it can be, right? We can have Lord Lestilaut do the altering stuff as long as we contract him not to leak any information."

Wilfried seemed very invested in Lestilaut's illustrations. I appreciated that he was so enthusiastic about a book—it really was nice to see—but this wasn't the time.

"Above all else, Ehrenfest needs illustrations that are easy to

print,” I said. “Though we do value their beauty as well, we gain nothing from buying art that we cannot actually use. Furthermore, we do not want to risk a greater duchy like Dunkelfelger stealing our newly researched technique before we have even begun selling books formally.”

“I see,” Lestilaut replied. “That is reasonable.”

Even then, Wilfried refused to give up. “But we have a chance to use such phenomenal art...” he said, his eyes desperately flitting between me and the illustrations he loved so much.

“Indeed” was my response. “These pictures are wonderful. Once we begin selling copies of the book in Ehrenfest, and our buyers start producing their own splendid leather covers, Lord Lestilaut can add these illustrations to his and revel in their glory.”

“But then I—*others* will not be able to see them,” Wilfried said.

I shrugged. “There is no helping that; keeping our industry secrets from leaking is our greatest concern. If your duchy, Dunkelfelger the Second, were to steal from us, then we would not be able to protest.”

Stenciling was the very foundation of mimeograph printing—yet someone with a sharp eye would probably be able to deduce how it worked simply by cutting out one of our illustrations. On top of that, the wax paper, styluses, and files were all the result of my Gutenbergs putting their heads together and really working hard; I couldn’t let the fruits of their labor be stolen so easily. We would one day spread our printing knowledge to other duchies, but we hadn’t even started selling books yet, so that wasn’t going to happen anytime soon. Only when Ehrenfest’s position had stabilized more would we consider that next step.

As well as all that, allowing Dunkelfelger to make its own stencils would set an unwanted precedent that future duchies we collaborated with might attempt to follow. Swearing them to silence through magic contracts would surely be a nightmare—and an expensive one, at that. Our actions here were going to have consequences for years to come.

Besides, my aim here was to bring a talented artist into Ehrenfest, not buy illustrations from an archduke candidate.

“Printing is entirely different from drawing with pens,” I said, trying to hammer home my argument. “If nobody else is permitted to touch the illustrations, then I expect Lord Lestilaut will complain when he sees the finished, printed product.”

Even back on Earth, copier machines didn’t create perfect copies—some lines came out incorrectly, or hard-to-control factors like dust caused minor imperfections. In this case, although Lestilaut’s illustration was designed to work in black and white, it had many thin lines. It was unavoidable that its atmosphere would change after it was stenciled.

“This is going to be our first time buying art from another duchy,” I continued. “If we charge ahead with this collaboration only for Lord Lestilaut to express his displeasure with our results, then we will severely damage the reputation of our printing industry. In that regard, not buying the art at all will spare both parties a great inconvenience.”

“True...” Wilfried reluctantly muttered, conceding with a look of severe regret.

Relieved, I turned back to Lestilaut, who was now watching me with an intrigued expression. “With all of this in mind,” I said, “will you sell your illustrations to Ehrenfest?”

His red eyes, which had just a moment ago been evaluating me, crinkled in a slight smile. “I understand Ehrenfest’s position. I will consider whether I am willing to entrust them to another and then give you my response.”

“Your work truly is splendid,” I said, returning his smile, “so I await a positive reply.”

Thus concluded that portion of our discussion. Lestilaut gestured for his apprentice scholars to begin clearing away the illustrations, then watched them work while sipping his tea. Once they were done, he turned back to us and said, “Now, with that settled, let us decide who shall announce our joint research and in what manner.”

It seemed that, if the two duchies working together each presented the results of their joint research, visitors would only visit the greater duchy. Thus, at times, even the lower-ranking duchy was made to present.

“In the case of our research, the only shared element was the questioning of the apprentice knights and your duchy’s students,” I said. “As there were quite notable differences between the rituals we performed, I believe we can announce our findings separately. Don’t you agree, Wilfried?”

“Yeah. I heard that Dunkelfelger’s successfully made pillars of light to obtain blessings, so you can include notes about that. If we publicize Ehrenfest’s rituals, then there should be no overlap.”

Hannelore gave a relieved smile; how one publicized their joint research often mattered most when trying to get the attention of adults visiting the Interduchy Tournament, so it tended to cause disputes between the collaborating students.

“In that case,” she said, “perhaps our scholars can discuss the shared elements. That which is not shared our duchies can present as we please.”

Wilfried and I agreed. We looked across the apprentice scholars present, and those involved in the joint research nodded to express their understanding.

Ahrensbach is going to present Raimund's findings, so all we need to think about now is negotiating with Drewanchel.

For that project, Ehrenfest was only supplying the ingredients and wasn't contributing much to the actual research, so perhaps it would be best to leave most of the announcements to Drewanchel. My only concerns were knowing their findings and securing more kinds of paper made from feyplants to use.

"It seems we have finished our discussion sooner than expected. Hm..." Lestilaut turned to Wilfried. "How about a game of gewinnen?"

Most girls could spend forever chatting at tea parties, but boys found that exceptionally boring.

Wilfried nodded, a broad smile on his face. "I might have lost last year, but I want to win against you at least once before you graduate, Lord Lestilaut." He was said to be rather skilled at gewinnen, and I'd heard that he often played against Ortwin of Drewanchel.

"Unfortunately for you, if you still cannot consistently beat Ortwin, then you will never beat me," Lestilaut scoffed, lighting a competitive fire under Wilfried.

Dunkelfelger's attendants got straight to work setting up a game of gewinnen on another table, showing neither surprise nor any sense of urgency. They must have planned it from the very beginning, in case we ended up having time to spare.

Not having anything else to do, I watched their preparations while eating sweets. My eyes soon came to rest on a blue gewinnen piece, which I noticed was modeled off of the clear, crystal statue also decorating Dunkelfelger's tea room.

"I see Dunkelfelger loves not just ditter, but gewinnen as well," I said. "That piece is based on that decorative statue, is it not?"

"Hm? Oh, yes. We, um... use gewinnen when debriefing after ditter games," Hannelore replied, looking a little embarrassed.

Those from Dunkelfelger loved ditter so much that not even their pre- and post-game rituals were enough; they gathered together to review each match as well. I had to wonder how much time they spent on ditter-related activities each year.

"Although you did not know what it was, Verfuheremeer's staff was passed down through the ages," I explained. "It would not have survived if you did not care so much about ditter and rituals."

"Speaking of divine instruments... Yesterday, during a tea party of top-ranking duchies, we discussed almost nothing but the other day's ceremony," Hannelore began. "Those who did not participate still spoke with those who did."

Those who had participated in the Dedication Ritual had apparently been deeply impacted by their first proper religious ceremony. The feeling of us all becoming one and the light that had

shot up from the chalice had left a great impression on all those present, offering something they had never experienced in their everyday lives. Those who had been unable to join now greatly anticipated their next opportunity.

“Normally, one must be first-in-class to receive direct praise from Zent Trauerqual,” Hannelore continued. “Everyone was moved, though not by that alone—many were also touched by the divinity of your form, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Divinity”? What the heck?

Hannelore was looking at me somewhat dreamily as she described the ritual as she had witnessed it. From her perspective, I had produced one divine instrument after another, performed a religious ceremony that none had experienced before, and even rejuvenated everyone’s mana before healing them all with a blessing. In other words, I had come across as quite the saint, despite all the panicking I was doing on the inside. My calm and composed act had paid off.

So, in other words, nobody noticed that I was sweating bullets trying to keep my mana from leaking out? Wow, I really have grown!

“It has become something of a trend to make charms for prayer, and many are looking into whether they can wield the divine instruments as you do,” Hannelore said. Some wanted to use Flutrane’s staff so they could heal groups of people at once, while others were fighting hard to get Leidenschaft’s spear. “However, as of yet, none have succeeded. They are producing the same spears with their schtappes as before, and offering one’s mana as per the ritual remains the most reliable way to earn blessings.”

That said, there were still people dying to wield Leidenschaft’s blue-glowing spear—including Aub Dunkelfelger, who had heard about it through a report.

“Thus, um, unless it is a secret that you must keep to yourself, might I ask how you learned to create multiple divine instruments?” Hannelore asked. She looked extremely apologetic; someone had clearly told her to ask me this.

“Well, how did you learn to create Verfuhereemer’s staff used in Dunkelfelger’s rituals?”

“We watch our parents make it, touch it, then channel our mana into it. Like this.”

Hannelore stood up to demonstrate. It seemed that my on-the-spot question had been interpreted as “If you want our secrets, reveal yours first.”

“Streitkolben.”

Hannelore spoke the chant, and Verfuhereemer’s staff appeared in her hand.

“May I touch it?” I asked.

“Yes, go ahead. Try channeling some of your mana into it, even.”

I touched the staff and channeled a small amount of my mana into it, as instructed. A magic circle rose up into the air... then Hannelore let out a little shriek as our mana rebounded.

“M-My apologies,” she stammered. “That was, erm... a bit surprising. I did not think I would feel another’s mana going inside.”

It wasn’t a big deal when members of the same family channeled mana together, since they had similar mana to begin with, but mine felt particularly strange to Hannelore. I understood how strange it was having another’s mana flow into you, so...

“I sincerely apologize for having made you uncomfortable,” I said.

“Oh, no. I should have known that would happen. Now I understand why the method of creating this staff is passed down only through our archducal family’s bloodline...” Hannelore replied, her shoulders slumped. She then noted that she had thought it would be convenient if everyone could learn to make the staff. Dunkelfelger was a very hot duchy, so maybe she wanted to perform a large-scale ritual to cool things down.

“If we only need the magic circle, we could try looking in the library’s underground archive. I recall seeing a circle similar to the one that arose just now on one of the ceremonial instructions there.”

“Oh my. In that case, we will need to wait for the royal family to summon us again,” Hannelore said with a giggle. She then asked me how I had learned to make the divine instruments—though the process was pretty much the same as how she had been taught to create Verfuhereimer’s staff.

“If you offer your mana to the divine instruments in the temple, then magic circles will arise,” I explained. “If you dedicate a certain amount of your mana to them, then the magic circles end up being... seared into your mind, so to speak. They will naturally come to you when you transform your schtappe.”

In my case, Schutzaria’s shield was the first instrument I’d ever offered my mana to, and the circle that had appeared at the time became my basis for making it. Perhaps the divine instruments in the temple were just there as guides for people to make their own.

“It seems that the first-ever Zent was a High Bishop,” I said. “My current theory is that their children learned to make their own divine instruments by offering mana to the ones in the temple.”

“Following the civil war, there were many from the temple who came to the Royal Academy,” Hannelore noted, “but none of them seemed to be able to use the divine instruments like you can.” She sounded curious, but the explanation was simple.

“I imagine some of them could, but why would they display such a talent when the temple receives so much scorn? Not to mention, as

you know, it requires a lot of mana to wield a divine instrument. Former blue priests and shrine maidens would not have learned to compress their mana before arriving at the Royal Academy on special terms, so I presume they would have struggled to maintain the instruments' forms."

Damuel struggled even now, and he had compressed his mana to such an extent that he was comparable to a mednoble. It was hard to imagine that students who had formerly been in the temple would have much luck trying to wield divine instruments.

"I would assume that any former priests who performed the temple's religious ceremonies seriously obtained multiple divine protections, but I cannot say the same for those who reviled the temple and wanted nothing more than to return to noble society or those who resented the gods alongside their situation."

To be frank, if the life the blue priests had lived under the previous High Bishop was the norm, then they would have been too corrupt to earn any extra divine protections. Not to mention, it was very possible that they hadn't been able to fill the magic circle during their ceremonies. I kept that all to myself, though, and merely wore a smile for Hannelore.

"Dunkelfelger has stories about divine instruments and gods not worshipped at shrines, correct?" I said. "Your history overwhelms us. Just the other day, one of your attendants said that Clarissa will 'become Ewigeliebe upon losing Erwaermen.' What did they mean? Such phrasing does not appear in any stories I am familiar with."

"The answer is within the book I am about to lend you," Hannelore replied. "Erwaermen the God of Binding was once a friend and subordinate of Ewigeliebe the God of Life. It was he who assisted the God of Life with proposing to Geduldh the Goddess of Earth and acquiring the permission of the God of Darkness."

It was because of Erwaermen's assistance that the marriage came to be, but what happened next was as the bible described: Erwaermen, outraged by the poor treatment that Geduldh and her subordinates received, got into a fight with Ewigeliebe before ultimately deciding to go his own way. Then, determined to save the Goddess of Earth, he brought her subordinates to Flutrane the Goddess of Water.

"To become Ewigeliebe upon losing Erwaermen means to lose a person who supports your engagement—that belittling what you should treasure will only lead you to lose your beloved," Hannelore concluded.

I see... Now that Hartmut's our High Priest, Clarissa is going to need a lot of support to marry him.

"But is Liebeshilfe not the divinity responsible for binding?" I asked.

“Erwaermen felt responsible for binding the threads that caused Geduldh’s suffering. For that reason, he surrendered his position as a god, instead giving his power to Liebeskhilfe.”

“I see. That might explain why the bible does not list him as a god...” My eyes darted to one of Dunkelfelger’s scholars—specifically to what they were holding. “If your book contains even more stories like that one, then I cannot wait to read it.”

“I, myself, have suffered quite a blow. To think *The Story of Fernestine* would end where it did... I am terribly curious about what will come next.”

So, Hannelore had caught the bookworm bug and was now itching for more. That was a good sign. She told me how her skin had crawled at the first wife’s cruelty, how she had wept for Fernestine’s situation, and how her heart had throbbed for Fernestine’s protective half-brother.

Her praise included the names of many gods, but I think we’re doing okay. I think.

“I really am glad that the story is not based on you, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Had it been, then the aub would not have allowed it to be printed.”

“Yes, I suppose that would be like him informing the world of his misdeeds. Still, there are many similarities between you and Fernestine: your hair color, your coming first-in-class, your history of being taken in before your baptism...” She lowered her voice. “I suspect there will be many others under the same misapprehension.”

“I thank you ever so much for your concern, but the second volume will clear up any such misconceptions. All will understand that Fernestine and I are separate people. It should be out soon, I believe.”

“Oh, please do allow me to borrow it! The first volume ended right after she finally escaped the cruel first wife by entering the Royal Academy and had such a wondrous romantic encounter. I’m simply beside myself with curiosity...”

As it turned out, Hannelore was debating whether she should root for the half-brother who protected Fernestine or the prince whom Fernestine just met, since both were so wonderfully romantic. Naturally, I wasn’t going to mention that the second volume started with the half-brother finding another partner—but Elvira would surely be glad to hear that people were so angry at the first wife and invested in the romance.

Speaking of being glad, Muriella sure seems to be enjoying this conversation. She’s nodding along so vigorously.

“My one concern is that this author sometimes writes bittersweet

tales of love. They are very beautiful, but if Fernestine meets a tragic end, well... I just do not know what I will do," Hannelore said, wavering with unease.

Though I didn't want to spoil any of the details, I decided to reveal that, in the end, Fernestine finds true happiness. I was sure that would allow Hannelore to relax and properly look forward to the sequels.

"I will support Fernestine until she finds that happiness," Hannelore declared with a smile—and at that moment, Wilfried stood up from his chair with a clatter, looking outright furious.

"You're wrong, Lord Lestilaut!"

What the...?!

The sudden exclamation caused all eyes to fall on the gewinnen table. Wilfried was gritting his teeth, staring daggers at his opponent. Meanwhile, Lestilaut waved his schtappe to move a piece, then casually looked up again.

"Wrong about what?" Lestilaut asked.

"I am going to be Ehrenfest's next aub. Not Rozemyne."

Confrontation

Hannelore informed me that she would be leaving her seat for a moment, then calmly walked over to Lestilaut. “Brother, what in the world did you say to Lord Wilfried...?” she asked quietly.

Lestilaut raised an eyebrow and, looking at Wilfried, replied, “Nothing at all.”

His nonchalant answer made Hannelore’s face cloud over. “If that were true, then Lord Wilfried would not have raised his voice. You must have offended him greatly. Lord Wilfried, I offer my sincerest apologies for my brother’s actions.”

Wilfried snapped back to reality and offered a polite smile. “Oh, no—it was nothing that you should feel the need to apologize for, Lady Hannelore. In fact, I should apologize to you all. My shallowness caused me to flare up over a simple mid-gewinnen taunt.”

At that, Wilfried carefully sat back down, turned to Lestilaut, and moved a piece. “Father—that is, Aub Ehrenfest—does not intend to make Rozemyne the aub,” he said. “He would never do something so cruel.”

“You mean to say it would be cruel to have her become aub?” Lestilaut asked, moving a piece in response before directing Wilfried a curious look.

Wilfried nodded and moved another piece. “As you know, Rozemyne is sickly enough that she has collapsed during several tea parties. He would not force his unhealthy daughter into such a demanding role. I ask for your understanding on this matter.”

Is he attempting to clear Sylvester’s name? It is true that Sylvester wouldn’t have his unhealthy adopted daughter serve as aub.

Hearing that, I understood what must have happened: Lestilaut had used Sylvester’s bad reputation as a mid-game taunt. I’d found the unending rumors irritating as well, so I could see why Wilfried had reacted so aggressively. As an archduke candidate, I was probably expected to chastise him and prop up Dunkelfelger... but I couldn’t see myself doing that.

“I thought it only common sense that the position of aub should go to whoever has the most mana and can benefit their duchy most, but... I see,” Lestilaut said. “Due to your sister’s poor health, you will become the next aub without consideration of your competence.”

I’d assumed that Hannelore’s interjection would calm things

down, but the taunts continued. Wilfried was balling his hands into such tight fists that his knuckles had turned white.

I moved to the side of the table where the gewinnen pieces were floating in place, getting in between Lestilaut and Wilfried. "I do not see what is so strange about this. Is it not normal for a healthy man with enough mana to support his duchy's foundation to become the next aub?"

Sure, I was getting healthier, but I was still weak by any normal standards. And on top of that, I was a woman; I wouldn't be able to carry out my duties while pregnant or after giving birth. It was totally expected that Wilfried would become the next aub instead, especially considering his high grades at the Royal Academy.

Lestilaut's red eyes betrayed amusement. For a moment, it felt like he was teasing us—or maybe even sizing us up. I couldn't help but falter under his terrifying stare.

"So, in short, you intend to resign yourself to becoming a first wife?" Lestilaut asked. "Despite all of your exceptional qualities?"

I shook my head. "I am not resigning myself to anything. I do not seek to be an archduchess in the first place."

"Then what *do* you seek?"

I smiled; there was only one answer to that question. "I wish to become an archduke's first wife, then the curator of my very own library. I shall gather more books than anyone has ever seen before."

That goal was why I started the printing industry to begin with. We were gathering various stories in the Royal Academy, making new books each year, and steadily increasing our readership. From there, we would target the commoners, starting with the literate rich and then working our way down until pretty much everyone could read. Such was my ultimate ambition.

Yes, I wanted enough status to achieve my aims, but I didn't want to do any work other than making books. I certainly didn't want to become an archduchess; I was busy enough just being the High Bishop.

"You wish to be a first wife and own a library?" Lestilaut repeated. "That can be arranged. Become my first wife, Rozemyne."

Excuse me...?

There was a pregnant pause, then a hysterical voice suddenly rang out. "Brother! What are you saying?!"

"Be silent, Hannelore," Lestilaut said, waving her away.

Hannelore took a step back, her lips pressed together obediently. Those among Lestilaut's retainers who had cried out in surprise likewise closed their mouths, overwhelmed by his intensity.

This was all so sudden that I was struggling to keep up. I wanted to believe that I'd simply misunderstood, but if all the dazed faces

around me were anything to go by, that probably wasn't the case. Still...

"My sincerest apologies, Lord Lestilaut," I said. "I seem to have misheard you. For a moment, I thought you asked for me to be your first wife."

"You are not mistaken," he casually replied. "That is exactly what I said."

I placed a hand on my cheek. His wanting me as a first wife was, in other words, a proposal. But this didn't make any sense; Lestilaut already had someone he was gifting a hairpin to, and proposals between nobles had to go through both parties' parents first. At least, that was what I'd assumed. Maybe romances between students at the Royal Academy didn't get reported until afterward. I'd never really looked into it, since I was already engaged, but now that decision was backfiring.

But don't proposals involve a feystone and a long, romantic speech filled with the names of the gods? I'm pretty sure you don't just slip them into an otherwise normal conversation... or have I been living under a rock?

How was I supposed to take Lestilaut's words? He knew about my engagement to Wilfried, so maybe this was all in jest, and taking it seriously would only result in me getting laughed at.

As I remained immobile, my hand still on my cheek, Lestilaut looked at Wilfried and me. "You have shown me your value. You have the mana to wield two divine instruments at once and a plethora of divine protections. You start new trends, began an industry that brings wealth to your duchy, have connections to greater duchies *and* the royal family, possess fame as a saint... And yet, despite all that, Lord Wilfried is calling himself the next aub—even though he knows so little about what will soon be his duchy's primary industry." A taunting grin spread across his face. "It would be comical were it not so sad."

He continued, "Furthermore, Rozemyne, although grades have risen all across Ehrenfest, you and your retainers stand far above the rest, and this joint research has made the chasm between your archduke candidates more than clear. It is a crime that your duchy's rank has risen so expeditiously due so largely to your singular influence. Those around you are not keeping up at all. Ehrenfest lurked at the bottom of the rankings before the civil war, and its neutrality secured it a middling rank after. You are ill-suited for such a place."

There wasn't a significant difference among our duchy's apprentice knights; they had all undergone extensive training under Bonifatius so that they were skilled enough to protect the archducal

family. Some of the dissimilarities among them were dependent on their age when they had begun using my mana compression method; otherwise, it all came down to their inherent talents and hard work.

Our apprentice scholars and attendants, on the other hand, were a separate story. My scholars who visited the temple had been molded by Ferdinand's intense training, and my attendants had to work to be ready for anything I might start. For those reasons, they were far more capable than those serving Wilfried and Charlotte.

"A bottom-ranking duchy weighed down by such outdated methods is no place for a ceaselessly inventive mind such as yours," Lestilaut continued. "Ehrenfest may be rising through the ranks through your power, but it will not be able to keep up with you. Its rightful place remains at the bottom of the rankings. I admire the aub's sagacity in plucking you from the temple, but one who would not immediately declare you the next aub does not understand your value. Ehrenfest has neither the capacity nor the ability to contain you forever."

His smile exuding confidence, Lestilaut gazed across Wilfried and all the Ehrenfest retainers in the room before returning his eyes to me. "If you have decided to live not as an aub but as a first wife, then come to Dunkelfelger. We have stockpiled countless books and documents over our long history; our collection is larger than any other in Yurgenschmidt."

Excuse me? Books and documents stockpiled over a long history, you say? A collection larger than any other in Yurgenschmidt? Oh, be still my beating heart! It sounds so... so wonderful.

I couldn't help being enraptured, and some powerful emotions stirred in my chest. Still, I used all my might to keep my body from visibly swaying. I needed to think carefully. This was an invitation from *Dunkelfelger*. There was more to this than reading books; experience made it clear that ditto was involved somehow.

"I... I will not go," I said.

"You're considering it."

"N-No, I am not. A-And, erm, my engagement to Wilfried already has the king's permission. It cannot be canceled," I retorted, puffing out my chest. It didn't matter what anyone said; this was a done deal.

Lestilaut waved me away as though he thought the very idea foolish. "That is permission and nothing more. There is no royal decree supporting it. Engagements within a duchy are always simple to cancel; your aub could rescind it with a single word."

It seemed that having the king's permission didn't make my union to Wilfried ironclad after all. Sylvester could end it without any trouble whatsoever.

"Dunkelfelger could even pressure Aub Ehrenfest to cancel your

engagement. The fact we have not done so already was only because we did not realize your value. Now, we do. By discussing business with me and not backing down in the slightest, you have all but proven that you are fit to be our duchy's first wife. If you wish to make books and spread your knowledge, there is no better place for you. Come to me, Rozemyne."

Financial resources, manpower, the fancy footwork required to adopt new ideas, an understanding of the importance of new technologies... One by one, Lestilaut listed off areas in which Dunkelfelger was superior. They were all things that I wanted. My heart wavered more and more.

"You will find much better workers in Dunkelfelger than in a backwater duchy like Ehrenfest."

EXCUSE ME?! I don't think there's anyone in the world who can match my Gutenbergs!

All at once, my excitement ceased. Going to Dunkelfelger would mean not getting to see my family again. It would mean abandoning my important duty of serving as a bridge between the nobles and the commoners. Not to mention, Ehrenfest was home to the library that Ferdinand had given me. I wasn't going to sever all these connections that I treasured so dearly.

"You have made a very appealing offer, but I must refuse," I said. At times like this, I needed to be clear and direct; even the slightest hesitation would allow a greater duchy like Dunkelfelger to play me like a fiddle. Above all else, I needed to make my stance clear: I had no intention of going to Dunkelfelger.

Lestilaut moved a gewinnen piece, then stroked his chin. "I offered what I considered to be good terms, but you ultimately refuse..." he muttered. "Where was my misstep, after I made your heart waver so strongly...?"

He had clearly been able to read my emotions through my face.

I was starting to feel relieved about having escaped this predicament, but then Lestilaut's atmosphere changed. His calm befitting a noble morphed into the intensity of a knight preparing for dinner.

"If you refuse, then I have no choice but to take you by force."

"Lord Lestilaut?!" I exclaimed.

"Brother, you must not—"

Lestilaut once again dismissed Hannelore's protest, his eyes like those of a predator watching its prey. "Obtain what you desire. Gather the strength required to win. Face the challenge as many times as it takes. Change your technique, change your equipment, but never give up. That is the Dunkelfelger way."

I'd never expected Lestilaut to look at me in that way, especially

when he had originally seen me as a fake saint and a spineless trickster. Plus, I already knew from Clarissa's proposal that those from Dunkelfelger were ruthless when it came to getting what they wanted. Lestilaut's attitude and the way he was speaking reminded me of the same forceful, dominant aura he had given off during our first confrontation over Schwartz and Weiss.

I took a step back.

"Rozemyne," Wilfried called from behind me.

I turned to look at him.

"I can't deny that Ehrenfest lacks in more areas than it thrives. Do you truly wish to stay?" he asked, looking uncomfortable. "I, erm... Only now, after hearing Lord Lestilaut say all that, have I come to understand your true value. I've always been focused on ways to keep you under control; unlike Dunkelfelger and Drewanchel, I never thought about putting all of your knowledge to use or spreading it throughout the country. I may intend to become Ehrenfest's next aub, but my focus should be on how to use your gifts, not suppress them..."

His shoulders slumped, Wilfried continued, "I've been an honor student for two years in a row, and my friendship and rivalry with Ortwin made me believe I was standing shoulder to shoulder with the top-ranking duchies. And yet, when we started our joint research with Drewanchel and it came to light that my apprentice scholars were vastly inferior, I gave up. I assumed there was no beating a top-ranking duchy."

In Ehrenfest, Wilfried was always being compared to me in a way that made him feel so mediocre. Here in the Royal Academy, however, he was able to spend time with other archduke candidates and actually develop some self-confidence. He considered himself above average for an archduke candidate, though that mindset had soon turned to arrogance that he was working hard enough already.

"The greater duchies immediately figured out all your good points and tried to make them their own," he muttered. "That never even occurred to me. I always thought that, since making books is like a hobby to you, it was best to leave the industry in your hands."

There was no way that Wilfried would have grown up with the sensibilities of a top-ranking duchy when he was raised in what everyone still considered a bottom-ranking one. The only way he was going to fix this was by learning while spending time with his friends from top-ranking duchies.

"If you've noticed that you aren't putting me to proper use, then you need only start," I said. "Everything I care about is in Ehrenfest. I do not intend to leave. Ehrenfest is my Geduldh."

"I see. Then, as the next aub, I will protect you," Wilfried declared with the utmost confidence. "Failing to do that when you want to stay

in Ehrenfest would make me a failure of a brother too.”

Lestilaut gave a ferocious grin. “If you are to call yourself a future aub, then prove your worth and keep Rozemyne from us. I challenge you to a game of ditter.”

To nobody’s surprise...

“This desire for Rozemyne to become Dunkelfelger’s first wife is not just my own,” Lestilaut noted. “I made agreements with both my father and mother. I shall use whatever means necessary to secure victory and force Ehrenfest to cancel your engagement.”

In other words, he intended to use Dunkelfelger’s status as the second-ranked greater duchy to slam us with pressure. I couldn’t imagine Sylvester taking the stress of that very well.

“What happens if we refuse your challenge?” Wilfried asked.

Lestilaut scoffed. “I will simply employ the same methods I would have used upon winning.”

“And if we win? Will you give up on Rozemyne?”

“Ditter matches are sacred. I swear to the gods that, if we lose, we will trouble her no further on this matter.”

Those from Dunkelfelger were annoying to deal with, what with their aggressive nature and obsession with ditter, but when it came to agreements like this, you really could trust them. That said, Lestilaut had been whaling into us this whole time; the last thing I wanted was for everything to go as he pleased.

What’s his weakness?

In his attempt to drag us into this ditter match, he was targeting all of our weak points: the bad rumors about Sylvester, the awkward position that Wilfried was in, my love of books... I needed to land at least one clean blow on him—one that would leave a nice, big bruise—else I wouldn’t be satisfied.

What weakness could I exploit to avoid this ditter game? I scanned the room... and then my eyes fell on Hannelore. She was looking right at us, her face a picture of worry and frustration after her failed attempts to stop Lestilaut.

“In that case,” I said, “on the day that Ehrenfest wins, my brother, Wilfried, will take Lady Hannelore as his second wife.”

“What?!” Wilfried exclaimed. “Rozemyne, what are you saying?!”

“Lady Rozemyne?!”

Shock and disbelief were clear on their faces. Their retainers stirred too. Overall, it was a slightly bigger reaction than when Lestilaut had proposed to me. I’d won.

“As you might know, Lord Lestilaut, my health is tragically irregular, and Wilfried needs a second wife. Ehrenfest could ask for nothing more than for an archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger to fill that role.”

“You would drag a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate as low as Ehrenfest, of all places? Don’t make me laugh!” Lestilaut barked, his eyebrows raised in outrage as he protectively stood in front of Hannelore. It appeared that my counterattack had succeeded.

“You can decide for yourself whether we go ahead with this. I find it equally absurd that you would exploit your duchy’s position to end an engagement approved by the king himself.” If they were serious, then I was serious too. But if they were willing to play it off as a joke, then I would do the same. “So, Lord Lestilaut? Is your ditter request legitimate or merely a jest?”

Ideally, I wanted him to back down. The very thought of sending Hannelore to be Ehrenfest’s second wife was unthinkable. But while we would have no choice but to accept Dunkelfelger’s game, they would need to consult their aub about one of their own being married into a middle duchy.

Sorry, Lady Hannelore. I needed to do anything I could to avoid this ditter match.

Wilfried must have figured out that I was trying to stop the ditter match. He swiftly recovered from his surprise, then gave Lestilaut a confident grin. “Do you really think it acceptable to wager your own little sister’s future on a game of ditter? I would advise you to consult your aub first. It is simply unfair of you to continue otherwise.”

“Lord Wilfried...” Hannelore uttered. “That’s right, Brother. You cannot put our futures at stake, as a jest or otherwise. Lady Rozemyne is already engaged.”

Unfortunately, her pleas fell on deaf ears. “This is no jest,” Lestilaut said. “I am resolved to make Rozemyne my own. For the future of Dunkelfelger.”

“You must not decide such things on your own! If we lose, I—”

“Father and I will decide whom you wed,” Lestilaut said firmly, forcing the now trembling Hannelore to avert her gaze and take a silent step back. “Your answer, Ehrenfest?”

Wilfried glanced at me, his expression unsure. “Rozemyne, are you really willing to put your future in my hands?”

“No game of ditter with me as the treasure will ever be lost, Wilfried.”



My future depended on the outcome of this game. I was going to go all out.

After receiving a much-needed push from me, Wilfried turned to his retainers. "I will protect Rozemyne, the treasure of Ehrenfest, with everything I have. Everyone, lend me your power!"

"Yes, my lord!" the apprentice knights replied in unison.

Wilfried, having seemed to gain strength from that, looked up at Lestilaut. "I accept your challenge! I am the next Aub Ehrenfest, and we will not let another duchy take our treasure so easily!"

"Well said."

Preparing for Ditter

“So, when will this game take place?” Wilfried asked. “Right away would be completely unreasonable, and we need to match how many knights you intend to put forward.”

“Indeed,” Lestilaut replied. “We of Dunkelfelger also need to prepare the arena. Once we have confirmed that Rauffen is available to judge and we have secured the grounds, I will contact you again.”

While the two boys were working out the details, the apprentice knights similarly gathered together. Theodore was left to guard me—as a first-year, he couldn’t play ditter—while Leonore and the others joined the meeting.

“How about some tea, Lady Rozemyne?” Hannelore asked, on the verge of tears as she gestured to the table. So much had happened over such a short time span; a hot drink sounded perfect.

I made my way to the seat indicated, and our attendants immediately prepared to refresh our tea. As I was watching Brunhilde pour my drink, Hannelore, eyeing Lestilaut and Wilfried, spoke in a hushed voice.

“Cordula, I wish to speak with Lady Rozemyne.”

“Here you are,” Cordula muttered in response, holding out sound-blocking magic tools. I gripped one at once; this was clearly something that Hannelore didn’t want Lestilaut to hear.

“I cannot apologize enough that our tea party ended up like this,” Hannelore said. “If only I were a stronger archduke candidate...”

Even though things had been going so well, Lestilaut had found it necessary to taunt Wilfried. Not even our attempts to smooth things over had worked, as he had then disparaged Ehrenfest and proposed to me in front of my fiancé. In response to my refusal, he had then pressured us and challenged us to ditter.

“You even offered to pretend that nothing happened,” she continued, “but my brother stomped all over your good intentions. I truly apologize.”

I shook my head. “My only intention was to escape this ditter game, but, in the end, I wrapped you up in all this as well. I am the one who must apologize.”

“No, no. It was my brother who refused to take the way out that you so graciously provided...” Hannelore replied with a sad smile.

I glared at Lestilaut. “If we win, Lady Hannelore, then I intend to

nullify the condition that you be wed into Ehrenfest. I wanted only to stop Lord Lestilaut; it would be much too rude of us to take you as our duchy's second wife."

"I appreciate the thought, I really do... but agreements made through ditter cannot be undone. Not in Dunkelfelger, at least."

"How annoying—um, I mean, obstinate—umm..." I fumbled my words, unsure of the proper noble language to use.

Hannelore merely hung her head. "No, that is accurate..."

"Well, what do *you* want to do, Lady Hannelore?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"If your heart is set on someone else, then I will negotiate with Dunkelfelger so that you can be married to them instead." Her duchy would probably find that easier to swallow than her being a second wife in Ehrenfest.

Hannelore blinked at my suggestion. "Well... my brother and parents were always going to choose my partner for me, so I never fostered any hopes of my own. But after you refused to bend to my brother's pressure—after you fought to see your will carried through—I started to wonder. Maybe I really would like to select my own partner."

"In that case, when Ehrenfest has won, I will ask that Dunkelfelger make it so."

"Oh, no, no. I could never burden Ehrenfest more than we have already. That you even considered such a kind gesture is enough for me," Hannelore said. She was wearing a smile, but it was more clouded than usual.

"Do not fear for your future—even if your move to Ehrenfest becomes unavoidable, I will welcome you with open arms and ensure that you find true happiness there. You will get to read new volumes before anyone else. It will be a bookworm's paradise!" I exclaimed, desperately trying to make it sound not so bad.

Hannelore giggled. "I am truly glad that this event has not convinced you to stop being my friend, Lady Rozemyne."

Dunkelfelger truly was a pain in the neck, but Hannelore was precious to me. At the very least, I didn't intend to stop being friends with her.

"After all, Lady Hannelore... you and I are soulmates!"

"Then, as your soulmate, I have just one more thing to say." Even with the sound-blocking magic tools, Hannelore lowered her voice to a whisper. "You may believe that your shield of Wind guarantees your victory, but know that it is not invincible. My brother has discovered means by which to deal with it. Do not let your guard down."

And with that, our tea party came to an end.

“Brother. Sister. I do not understand,” Charlotte said, her face ashen. “How did a simple tea party end in a dinner challenge with your engagement on the line?”

We had gathered everyone in the common room to explain the day’s events. Lestilaut’s blatant selfishness was clearly to blame for our circumstances, but no matter what we said, Charlotte struggled to follow.

“Rozemyne,” Wilfried muttered, “I now understand how you feel when people are demanding answers but you have nothing to say.”

“I am glad,” I replied with a smile. “In that case, I leave convincing Charlotte to you.”

Wilfried smiled back. “No, I leave this to you, since you’re so much more experienced.”

“Oh my. But have we not just learned from Lord Lestilaut that you shouldn’t always rely on me?”

That was enough to twist his arm.

And, to be clear, I’m not being lazy here; I just want Wilfried to grow.

Wilfried tried his very best to explain the situation, only to eventually throw in the towel and declare, “There’s no point explaining all this! Planning to deal with it comes first!”

In turn, Charlotte gave up on understanding the specifics. “I still cannot see how one thing led to another, but indeed; let us focus on dealing with it instead. I assume that, with Sister being able to use Schutzaria’s shield, our victory is mostly assured.”

“About that...” I interjected. “Lady Hannelore gave me a warning. It seems that Dunkelfelger knows how to defeat my shield. Leonore, what are our chances without it?”

Leonore’s expression turned stiff as she said, “Exceedingly low. However, as we do not know the extent to which the shield will be nullified, not using it at all would be a poor move. And even if you cannot use your shield, you still have your highbeast.”

Laurenz nodded. “The biggest weakness of using the shield is how long it takes to form. Were I fighting alongside Dunkelfelger, I would target Lady Rozemyne from the start. Countermeasures or no, surely it would be better to finish things before she employs it at all.”

As he said, the chant for the shield was not a quick one. We needed a way to keep me safe until our defenses were formed.

“How might we accomplish that?” I asked. “A wide-range spell that could take them by surprise and make them falter for a moment, perhaps? Like some kind of waschen flood.”

Matthias rejected the idea outright, a calculating look on his face. “You are the only one who could cast such a spell, Lady Rozemyne—and as this distraction is intended to secure you more time to finish the shield, it must be done by the knights. Plus, even if our knights

were to combine their mana for such an attack, the fight would end then and there.”

He made a good argument. I pursed my lips in thought—at which point Rihyarda stepped forward.

“May I speak for a moment? As an adult, I am hesitant to speak on matters of the Royal Academy, but I cannot allow milady to be taken by Dunkelfelger. If you are playing treasure-stealing ditler, then replace a couple of your knights without much mana with apprentice archattendants who have a tremendous amount.” It seemed that she was basing her suggestion on past ditler games she knew about.

“But what role would attendants play?”

“They can fill magic tools with mana and manage rejuvenation potions. Judithe specializes in ranged combat, does she not? Assign her an attendant with plentiful mana and get her to use magic tools filled with mana. That will increase the number of magic tools she can be entrusted with.”

There was a limit to how many rejuvenation potions battle-ready apprentice knights could carry—but having attendants at the ready to supply them would increase that number considerably.

“Attendants who could use healing spells were also occasionally stationed in the home circle,” Rihyarda continued. “Unlike the knights, they did not engage in direct combat and were primarily there to provide mana. Scholars, on the other hand, spent the run-up to the game preparing magic tools, rejuvenation potions, and the like, to the point that they were completely drained of mana come the day of.”

Wilfried fell into thought, then looked around at the attendants. “Who here has the most mana? We’ll replace two knights.”

Isidore, who attended to Wilfried, and Brunhilde were ultimately selected, as they both knew my mana compression method.

“Could the three of us cast a large-scale waschen like Rozemyne suggested?” Wilfried asked. “If so, we could buy her time without the knights having to use any mana, then recover our mana while they’re fighting.”

Brunhilde suddenly turned to face me. “Lady Rozemyne, did Lady Clarissa not say during last year’s Interduchy Tournament that she was researching magic tools to amplify wide-reaching spells?”

“An excellent idea,” I replied. “Naturally, we cannot ask Clarissa herself, but perhaps Hartmut or Raimund remembers the details of her research.”

“Don’t *you* remember?” Wilfried asked. “You were there as well, weren’t you?”

I averted my eyes, fully aware that I didn’t have a good excuse. At the time, I simply hadn’t cared about Clarissa’s research. In what

could only be described as an “Angelica moment,” I’d just been looking around and thinking to myself, “Wow, everyone sure is talking about complicated stuff.”

“Leonore, I intend to leave the strategizing to you,” Wilfried continued, “but I’ve got one request: I want you to come up with a way to make good use of my mana.” He trained with the knights back in Ehrenfest and, as an archduke candidate with an abundance of mana, could utilize very strong attacks. His only issue was that he didn’t have much experience with coordinated combat.

Leonore smiled at his request. “We will entrust you with defense, Lord Wilfried. Our home circle will contain Lady Rozemyne; Judithe, our long-range specialist; and the apprentice attendants. If you guard them with your plentiful mana, then we can devote more manpower to our offense.”

“Got it. Rozemyne, are there any divine instruments I could use? During the ternisbefallen attack, you created an opportunity for everyone using the divine cape. I just need something like that—an attack that Dunkelfelger doesn’t know about—and we should be able to catch them completely off guard.”

Something like that would give Wilfried an important role to play and a good opportunity to use his mana even without him joining the knights. I thought back to the temple’s divine instruments.

“You’ll need to offer your mana to the divine instruments if you want to learn to make them, though, and I’m not sure there’s enough time before our ditte game... Let us ask Sylvester to lend us the temple’s instruments. You can use those simply by channeling mana into them.”

Forming divine instruments with your schtappe required a lot of mana; there was the initial investment required to learn the circle, then there were the costs of making, maintaining, and actually using the instrument. However, if you used an instrument directly—like how I used Leidenschaft’s spear during my first Lord of Winter hunt—then you could skip all but the very last requirement.

“However,” I continued, “you cannot use Leidenschaft’s spear. It is a fine weapon for taking down everything—including treasure—but we cannot use it against Lady Hannelore. Nothing is quite as terrifying as a spear piercing through a shield.”

“That’s right,” Wilfried said, nodding in agreement. When it came to holding back power, it was important to use a familiar weapon.

“I already intend to make Schutzaria’s shield, so there’s no need for you to use that—especially if our opponents are able to break it. We can rule out Flutrane’s staff as well; it heals everyone in the area, meaning it would heal our enemies too.”

“That would be a problem, yeah.”

“We should also avoid using the God of Darkness’s cape, since that might be mistaken for a black weapon and cause us even more problems. I wouldn’t recommend the crown of Light either; that’s only used for contracts, to my understanding. I think that leaves Ewigeliebe’s sword as the only divine instrument I’ve not yet used.”

“Er... what does it do? Does it have some special effect, like how the shield of Wind repels anyone malicious?”

“I don’t have a use for it, and it can only be used during winter, which makes it rather inconvenient. However, it may be well suited for this battle. I will send an emergency message to Ehrenfest asking for it to be sent over.”

I penned a letter explaining that Dunkelfelger was pressuring us into an unavoidable ditto game and what was at stake, then sent it as a report alongside a request for Ewigeliebe’s sword to be sent from the temple. Incidentally, I also requested that Hartmut be asked what he remembered about Clarissa’s research.

“Send this to Ehrenfest immediately!” Wilfried ordered.

“Understood,” his attendant replied, then rushed out of the room.

Roderick looked up. “I have compiled a list of magic tools from Lord Ferdinand’s ditto notes that might be of use to us. Leonore, may it assist you with your planning.”

Leonore accepted the list with a smile and a thank-you, then began giving directions. “Apprentice scholars, make rejuvenation potions and the magic tools listed here. Apprentice knights, mobilize at our gathering spot. We will train and collect ingredients.”

As the students began following orders, Matthias approached me and said, “Lady Rozemyne, could I ask you to bless us before we go? If we can get ourselves used to it, then it may raise our chances of victory. We have a very low success rate when it comes to earning blessings on our own.”

“The blessings I give will not actually benefit everyone, but I suppose there is no helping that...”

As the saying went, one had to break a few eggs to make an omelet—and, given what was at stake, we weren’t in a position to be picky with our methods. I didn’t have a clue how advanced Dunkelfelger’s blessings had gotten by this point.

I gave the apprentice knights Angriff’s blessing and then saw them off. Wilfried went with them, leaving me with Charlotte, the attendants, and the bare minimum number of guard knights.

“If possible... I would like to steal Dunkelfelger’s blessing.”

We could hardly use blessings ourselves, but Dunkelfelger had gotten used to them through practice, which made their apprentice knights a huge threat. Hannelore had allowed me to touch Verfuhrmeier’s staff earlier today but, of course, that single time

wasn't enough for me to learn to recreate it.

"Bleh... I want to go to that archive. I need the royal family's permission, but... they're busy with Mana Replenishment right now, aren't they? I wonder whether Prince Hildebrand would give his permission, since he's still in the Royal Academy..."

"I would not expect so," Rihyarda said in response, but I decided to try anyway. Even if he refused, which he most likely would, we wouldn't be in a worse position than before. I repeated that to myself as I sent off the ordonnanz, and the next thing I knew—

"We can go, but only tomorrow morning. I'll send an ordonnanz to Hannelore too," Hildebrand replied, sounding excited.

"Rihyarda... This may be very abrupt, but he gave his permission."

"I did not think you would get another chance until the royal family has far more leeway..." Rihyarda muttered, baffled. But, well, here we were. It was time to prepare for another trip to the library.

I made my way to the library the next morning, brimming with excitement. Accompanying me were Leonore, since she was an archknight and could enter the underground; Theodore, who couldn't participate in ditter as a first-year; plus Rihyarda and Brunhilde.

"Milady here."

"Milady. Finally back."

Schwartz and Weiss were exceedingly cute as they welcomed me—but, for some reason, they had returned to calling me "milady."

"Professor Solange," I said, "is it not strange that Schwartz and Weiss are addressing me as 'milady' again?"

"It started the other day when you all offered the library that chalice of mana," Hortensia explained. "I consulted Prince Anastasius, who said that ownership will likely return to me eventually."

Evidently, that swap back hadn't happened yet.

Hortensia guided us to the office, saying how surprised she had been to receive a message from Hildebrand. The third prince himself was already waiting for us.

"I apologize for the disturbance while you are so busy," I said. "To think that I forced you to come all this way..."

"I was taken aback by the suddenness of your request, but what do you want to research?"

"I can tell you after we open the archive."

Hannelore arrived while I was exchanging the usual pleasantries with Hildebrand. She had fewer retainers with her than usual, likely because they were training for our ditter game. We all exchanged greetings, then the two librarians explained that, with final exams on the horizon, they hadn't been able to close off the reading room. As a result, we were guided to the closed-stack archive in full view of the

other students.

From there, Hortensia guided us downstairs. We opened the locks, as we had done before, after which our attendants began preparing tea.

“Rozemyne, the archive is open,” Hildebrand announced. “Now, tell me what you are researching.”

“There is soon going to be a ditler match between Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger, so I am here to research rituals and divine instruments.”

Hannelore gave me a slight, teasing smile. “Should you be saying such things while I am within earshot, Lady Rozemyne?”

“It makes no difference. I am sure that Dunkelfelger expected as much already.”

“Why is this ditler match happening to begin with?” Hildebrand asked. “It was only recently that Dunkelfelger played against the duchies wanting to participate in the ritual, was it not?”

I gave a light shrug. “Lord Lestilaut proposed to me, and now my future husband is dependent on a game of ditler. Isn’t that right, Lady Hannelore?”

“I-Indeed,” Hannelore added, her voice quavering. “But, Lady Rozemyne, we do not have much time. Let us hurry and start researching.”

I waved to Hildebrand, then made my way over to the clear entrance of the archive.

“Hannelore,” Hildebrand called, “I wish to hear more about this game of yours. You have nothing to research, I presume?”

I saw Hannelore pause in surprise as I stepped through into the archive. Schwartz looked up at me and said the same thing as before.

“Milady. Not enough prayer.”

“Understood,” I replied. “I don’t have time today, but I will pray at a later date. For now, please bring me documents relating to Verfuhereemer’s ritual for cooling the heat of summer and the ritual for summoning spring.”

From there, I searched for how to make Verfuhereemer’s staff, then transcribed the method. I also wrote down how to make the stand needed for Haldenzel’s spring-summoning ritual.

“So, Prince Hildebrand has learned about our ditler match...” came Hannelore’s voice.

I gazed up to see her looking down at the documents I was transcribing. “Did you not want him to know about it?”

She offered a weak smile. “It was only recently that Prince Anastasius scolded us and told us not to cause any trouble. The royal family are going to summon us again for certain.”

“Well... we did nothing wrong this time. Lord Lestilaut is at fault, so perhaps Prince Anastasius can scold him in our stead.”

I was seeking Hannelore's agreement, but she didn't seem convinced. "I expect we are going to be scolded even if we protest that we are not at fault. I always receive the blame for my brother's actions..."

Hannelore then indicated that we should leave the archive; fourth bell was upon us, it seemed. A quick glance around revealed that Hildebrand had at some point disappeared from behind the transparent wall.

After locking the archive with Hannelore and Hortensia, I asked Rihyarda where the prince had gone.

"He had quite a lengthy conversation with Brunhilde about Ehrenfest books, but then he remembered that he had some urgent business to attend to."

It was quite impossible to "forget" urgent business when you had attendants managing your schedule for you; that had simply been an excuse for him to leave. He was still a young kid, so I could imagine how antsy he had gotten having to sit around and wait.

Upon our return to the Ehrenfest Dormitory, we found Ewigeliebe's sword waiting for us—and Hartmut along with it. As it turned out, my most recent report had caused Sylvester and Florencia such agonizing headaches that they were unable to move.

"To think you would come as well, Hartmut..."

"As the High Priest, it is my duty to carry our divine instruments. Furthermore, did you not write that you wish for me to teach you the details of Clarissa's research?"

"You remember them?" I asked, blinking.

"Of course," he replied with a nod, speaking as though it were obvious. "Clarissa requested my assistance, which I provided to some degree, so I remember the schematics precisely."

"Excellent, Hartmut! Oh, you truly are a retainer I can rely on!" I declared, overcome with excitement.

Hartmut gave a slight smile and said that he was honored to have pleased me, but then his expression turned serious. "I have been given a room in the castle until your dinner match commences and will come here daily to deliver Ewigeliebe's sword. I can also help with the creation of any magic tools within the dormitory. I will offer my all to protect you, Lady Rozemyne."

"Would it not be unfair to have you make magic tools...?" I asked, tilting my head at him.

Wilfried grimaced, Ewigeliebe's sword in hand. "You asked for a divine instrument to be brought from the temple and used Prince Hildebrand to transcribe documents from the underground archive, and *now* you're worried about playing fair? We only need to win; it doesn't matter how we go about doing it. Use everyone and

everything that you can.”

And so, with Hartmut at the lead, Ehrenfest’s apprentice scholars steadily began making magic tools for our upcoming battle. The apprentice knights cycled between training and gathering ingredients, all the while thinking up several strategies they could employ. And as for Brunhilde and Isidore, they desperately compressed their mana, trying to increase their mana quantities as much as possible, while learning how to use the created magic tools one after another.

I accompanied the apprentice knights to our gathering spot, where I practiced granting them blessings and then making Verfuhrer’s staff to remove them again. At the same time, I taught Wilfried to use Ewigeliebe’s sword.

“As an example, I will make Ewigeliebe’s sword myself,” I said, then turned my schtappe into a sword and spoke the God of Life’s prayer. A blizzard formed around me, a pillar of white light appeared, and mana shot off somewhere once again.

I got the feeling that, in the run-up to our dither match, there were going to be a lot of spontaneous lights shooting up into the sky. Both from us and from our opponents.

Bride-Taking Ditter

“Ooh, Lady Rozemyne! The day has finally come!” Rauffen said, welcoming us to the arena with a grin so eager it was annoying. “Bride-taking ditter isn’t all that rare back in Dunkelfelger, but I never thought such a large-scale version would take place here in the Royal Academy. Ah, such passion is heartening to see!”

The only reason we’re here is because your duchy is putting so much political pressure on us... Is that really “passion”? Is this truly “heartening”?

According to Rauffen’s explanation, what we were going to play was basically the same as treasure-stealing ditter, albeit with a different name. In Dunkelfelger, it happened when a boy’s proposal to a girl was refused by her parents; relatives from both houses would come together so the bride could be with her suitor.

Generally, in cases when the groom-to-be lost, he would simply stop pursuing the girl. Further conditions were very unusual, so those from Dunkelfelger had been very surprised by my declaration that we would get Hannelore if we won. This wasn’t an Ehrenfest custom, though; we weren’t about to play ditter without anything to gain.

Though I suppose there’s some value in having a way to make obstinate Dunkelfelger boys give up for good.

“You have my full support, Lady Rozemyne,” Rauffen continued with a smile. “We would love to have you marry into our duchy.”

He was making it sound as though I actually wanted this ditter game to happen. I opened my mouth to protest, but before I could speak a word, Hirschur literally pushed Rauffen aside and glared down at me with a look of extreme displeasure.

“Lady Rozemyne, I believe I asked you not to interfere with my research. What is the meaning of this?”

Hirschur had apparently been chosen to serve as a judge from Ehrenfest. She would be watching the game from the audience, while Rauffen would be flying around the arena, evaluating the match from atop his highbeast. As a dormitory supervisor, Hirschur had been unable to refuse; she had been cruelly dragged from her laboratory, and while she was so focused on the upcoming Interduchy Tournament publications. No wonder she was ticked off.

“It was Dunkelfelger who challenged us, and their rank meant we could not refuse,” I said, trying to plead my case. “Please complain to

them instead.”

“Believe me, I have already.”

It seemed that not even my excuse was enough to rid Hirschur of her discontent. Wilfried and I both went ahead and apologized to her.

“My research environment has finally been perfected,” she said. “I would not want you losing now.” She was supporting me, in her own, unusual way.

I could only respond that I would do my best.

A look at the audience revealed that students from both Dunkelfelger and Ehrenfest had come en masse to support us. A few from Dunkelfelger were holding what appeared to be a large magic tool.

What is that thing...?

I decided to ask Hannelore. She was clad in a full suit of armor, similarly to the other knights, though she wasn’t wearing a helmet.

“Um, Lady Hannelore... what is that magic tool some of your duchy’s spectators are holding? Audience participation is forbidden, is it not?”

“Oh, that is simply for recording the ditter match. Aub Dunkelfelger requested it so that he might see how the fight goes. It will not influence the game at all, so please pay it no mind, if you can.”

Aub Dunkelfelger had apparently asked to come to the Royal Academy to watch the bride-taking ditter game, putting Rauffen in quite the bind. This magic tool was more or less a desperate compromise to keep him in his home duchy.

“If your aub sent that magic tool, does that mean he supports our decision to play with your marriage on the line?” I asked. My hope had been that he would stop Lestilaut’s rampage, not enable it.

Hannelore lowered her gaze. “He said that he could not shame us all by interrupting what must be decided through ditter. ‘Do anything you can to win!’ were his words.”

“We would have been extremely grateful if he had canceled things...”

Both Hannelore and I were being treated as treasure, with our very futures on the line; we wanted this match less than anyone. But some things just didn’t pan out how you wanted them to.

“Now then, shall we go?” Rauffen asked, then took the lead and flew down to the arena grounds with the apprentice knights.

I waved goodbye to Hannelore, then climbed into my highbeast. Inside was a box filled with magic tools and rejuvenation potions.

“Brother, Sister, do your best,” Charlotte said, having flown over to offer a few words of encouragement. The apprentice knights surrounding her, who were all first- and second-years, looked

particularly anxious—as expected, considering that the older students were about to play ditler.

“Theodore,” I said; he was among those surrounding Charlotte. “Please keep my sister safe. Such is the duty I am entrusting to you.”

“You can count on me. May Angriff be with you and my sister.”

Charlotte and the others cheered me on as I made my way down to Ehrenfest’s base in the arena. All of our players had collectively dispelled their highbeasts and were now standing in formation. After confirming that Brunhilde and Isidore had taken out the box of magic tools and such, I got rid of my own highbeast and joined the others.

Making up our front line were our archknights and our medknights with an abundance of mana. Matthias, Laurenz, and Traugott were among them. The next line was composed almost entirely of medknights, with Leonore being the sole exception; she was going to be giving instructions to everyone. Behind them were the two attendants, wearing light armor that covered only their important parts, rather than a full set of plate armor.

Incidentally, I was wearing light armor as well. Full plate armor wasn’t actually very heavy—it was made with a feystone, after all—but it limited one’s vision and was very restrictive. In that sense, it was like wearing cardboard. I already found it difficult to move, so the last thing I needed was to handicap myself even more.

Wilfried was positioned between the two attendants, fully armored, and then there was the back row, which was simply me (the treasure) and Judithe, who was going to protect me while firing off long-range attacks.

Our opening move is going to depend on whether I can get my shield up in time...

Leonore had told me to use geteilt right away, then hide behind it while chanting to complete Schutzaria’s shield. The apprentice knights were confident that our opponents would try to interfere, and as there was some distance between our bases, a long-range battle was pretty much guaranteed.

Thus, our apprentice knights would all use geteilt to block Dunkelfelger’s attacks and buy me time. Meanwhile, Wilfried, Brunhilde, and Isidore would target the enemy base with an area-of-effect waschen.

Isidore touched the belt around his waist; we weren’t allowed to hold our schtappes or magic tools until the signal that marked the beginning of the game. The atmosphere truly was tense. I swallowed hard, thinking through all the strategies we had gone over.

“Both leaders, come forward!” Rauffen ordered.

Wilfried did as instructed, his helmet under his arm. From the other side of the arena, I saw Lestilaut do the same, helmet in hand.

For the first time, I peered across at Dunkelfelger's base. Enhancing my eyes allowed me to see everything clearly—including the large boxes by some of the students' feet. It seemed that our opponents had also thought to bring plenty of magic tools and rejuvenation potions. They were all wearing full plate armor, which made me think they were all knights, but perhaps there were some attendants of the sword among them too.

Does this mean we came up with the same plan? Or is this what they normally do for bride-taking ditter? I'm sure they received advice and assistance from the others in their duchy too.

I wonder if we'll be okay...

Everything was so tense, and I was anxious to the point of trembling. I'd given Dunkelfelger a copy of *A Ditter Story* some time ago, so they probably already knew about several of Ferdinand's strategies—and if they'd also received guidance from knights of the day, then it was possible they had predicted our intentions.

Hartmut had been visiting our dormitory each and every day, stressing that we weren't to lose. Sylvester had allowed us to borrow a divine instrument and was providing his support on top of that. And then there were Bonifatius, Karstedt, and all the others who had advised us on strategies. We had to come out on top here.

Wilfried and Lestilaut were soon face-to-face, fixing one another with stern glares. Rauffen, who was standing between them, took out his schtappe and pointed it toward the sky, spurring them both to do the same.

"May this be a nice, fair game," Lestilaut said.

"Our aub instructed us to do everything in our power to protect Rozemyne," Wilfried replied. "We will not lose."

At that, Wilfried and Lestilaut turned away from each other, went back to their respective bases, and then donned their helmets. After confirming that everyone was in position, Rauffen made his schtappe—which was still pointed toward the heavens—turn blue, then swung his arm down.

"Begin!"

"Geteilt!"

In an instant, Ehrenfest's apprentice knights all produced their schtappes and readied their shields. I did the same, then began my chant.

"O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, protector of all..."

Isidore grabbed a magic tool from his hip and thrust it up into the air, causing several magic circles to form. It was a device that bolstered the strength of wide-ranging spells, made for us by Hartmut based on Clarissa's research.

"O twelve goddesses who serve by her side..."

No sooner had the magic circles appeared than Wilfried, Brunhilde, and Isidore all raised their schtappes. At the same time, Matthias shouted, “Dunkelfelger has thrown something! Ready yourselves!”

Even then, I continued my chant: “Please hear my prayer and lend me your divine strength.”

An instant later, a blinding light flashed across Ehrenfest’s base. Thankfully, the attack largely missed me—I was behind several apprentice knights and shorter than everyone else—but the knights in the front row got completely blasted. Some cried out that they couldn’t see a thing.

“*Waschen!*”

Still, we didn’t need to see to accomplish what was our main objective right now—flooding Dunkelfelger’s base. Wilfried, Brunhilde, and Isidore had more mana than anyone else in the Ehrenfest Dormitory, and, even with their arms covering their faces, they had unleashed the greatest waschen they could manage. A torrent of water now raced toward our opponents.

“Graaah?!”

“What the heck is going on?!”

Dunkelfelger’s knights who had been closing in on our blinded apprentices were buffeted by a torrent of water, as were the enemy knights who had raised their weapons while preparing to unleash a full-power attack. Before they knew what was going on, they were all being washed to and fro.

We could have ended the game then and there if we had swept Hannelore out of her base, but alas, the apprentice knights who had stayed to guard their treasure had stood their ground and blocked the water with their shields.

The waschen was frightfully strong—as expected, considering that it had come from three powerhouses—but it lasted only about ten seconds. And since the spell merely cleaned things before vanishing without a trace, we hadn’t even left their capes all wet and heavy.

In what felt like no time at all, the stunned Dunkelfelger knights scrambled back to their feet and started following orders to reconvene back at their base. We had managed to buy ourselves twenty seconds in total—and that was more than long enough for me to finish Schutzaria’s shield.

“Grant me your shield of Wind, so that I might blow away those who mean to cause harm!” I declared.

There was a sharp noise, then the hemisphere that was Schutzaria’s shield formed around me. At the same time, a pillar of yellow light shot up into the sky.

“Bwuh?!” I sputtered, my eyes wide. I was used to seeing beams of

light during ceremonies performed at the Royal Academy, but never for something like this. Thinking about it, I usually made Schutzaria's shield by channeling mana into my ring. This was my first time speaking the chant after turning my schtappe into a shield with *geteilt*.

"Well, Dunkelfelger receives blessings, so maybe the important part is using your schtappe for a ritual, or chanting the prayer..." I muttered, staring up at the light.

Leonore, having instructed our blinded apprentice knights to retreat behind the shield, whipped her head around to look at Judithe and me. "Lady Rozemyne, begin the ocean ritual at once! Judithe, buy her time! The knights are worthless now!"

I produced my schtappe again and made Verfuhereemer's staff, which I'd researched in the library and then practiced making. My schtappe shone as I drew Verfuhereemer's sigil in the air and chanted, "*Streitkolben*." I needed to go through the extra step so that I wouldn't mentally confuse it with Flutrane's staff.

"O Goddess of Oceans Verfuhereemer..." I said, beginning the prayer while gently spinning the staff. My intention was to seize the blessings that Dunkelfelger had received for this match and return them to the gods.

"I'm going!" Judithe called out in response to Leonore's command and jumped onto her highbeast. She flew up and took the place of the Wilfried squad, all of whom had fallen back to chug rejuvenation potions. Then—

"Hyah!"

Judithe used a sling to throw a softball-sized magic tool at our opponents reconvening at their base.

"Something's coming!" one of their knights shouted. "Knock it back!"

"It's not worth the risk!" cried another. "Catch it with a net!"

One of Dunkelfelger's apprentice knights transformed their schtappe into a net and caught the magic tool. They had anticipated that it would explode—and explode it did, spraying out dust and red smoke the instant it made contact.

"Gaaah! My eyes!"

"H-Hrk! M-My throat!"

"Don't breathe in! It makes your extremities go numb!"

The apprentice knights regrouping at Dunkelfelger's base suddenly began to flail and struggle in pain. They were in no condition to attack us.

"Hartmut shows not even a shred of mercy for Lady Rozemyne's enemies..." Brunhilde uttered, awestruck, as she recovered her mana using a potion. Hartmut had gotten the apprentice knights to gather a

red-and-white spiky fruit called a “negarosh.” He had then crushed the fruit into powder and weaponized it with the use of an exploding magic tool.

Powdered negarosh was a very effective irritant, making those who got even the smallest amount in their eyes weep uncontrollably. Those who inhaled it wouldn’t fare any better; their noses would itch and gush snot, and their throats would sting and burn. Some would end up feverish, while others would lose all feeling in their hands and feet. Hartmut had said that the effects were short-lived and that a simple waschen could wash the powder from one’s eyes, but still—Ehrenfest’s magic tool had proven far more vicious than Dunkelfelger’s simple blinding one.

“Do not falter!” Lestilaut exclaimed. “We learned two years ago that Rozemyne uses vicious, cowardly tricks unbecoming a saint. Wash the powder away with waschen!”

I didn’t come up with this; Hartmut did.

Putting that aside, I poured mana into my physical enhancement magic tools while spinning Verfuhereemer’s staff. There came the rushing sound of waves, then the Dunkelfelger apprentice knights started being stripped of their blessings.

Our opponents, who were so accustomed to their enhancements, immediately began to stumble and drop to the ground. I was also trying to steal their passionate, competitive spirit and calm their hearts; it would take them some time to pump themselves up again.

“What are you doing?!” Lestilaut roared at us from Dunkelfelger’s base. “The match isn’t over yet!” This was far more than just a post-dinner ritual, however; it was meant to calm heat.

Though it’s not really meant to be performed midway through winter...

“To the gods who granted us their blessings, with our gratitude and prayers, we offer our mana,” I prayed, holding Verfuhereemer’s staff overhead. A tremendous *boom* then followed as a pillar of light fired up into the sky, followed shortly after by the mana of the blessings I had stolen.

Our opponents were dazed, their blessings having been stolen before the fight could properly begin... but now we were going to be playing on more equal terms.

By the time Dunkelfelger’s apprentice knights were back in formation, our knights who had previously been blinded were able to see again. Everyone was on highbeast, ready to fight.

“Lady Rozemyne may have removed our opponents’ blessings, but do not let your guard down; they still have Rarstark,” Leonore said. “Traugott, Laurenz, stay on him at all times. Do not separate from one another. Is that understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Traugott and Laurenz replied, saluting. Whoever

this “Rarstark” person was, he was evidently strong enough that our two best close-range fighters needed to face him together.

Since our game two years ago, when we were very clearly outmatched, our apprentice knights had learned to coordinate with one another and gotten stronger by obtaining more mana. Still, our opponent was on another level; according to Matthias, our research into earning blessings through rituals had made them more impassioned than ever before.

Taking on Dunkelfelger was like playing an imbalanced game of chess; we were stuck with the usual distribution of pieces, while our opponent had many, many more to choose from. Its pawns were gone, replaced with bishops, rooks, knights, and queens. We were already at a disadvantage, yet now two of our high-value pieces were having to focus on Rarstark.

“May Angriff the God of War bless those of Ehrenfest,” I said, channeling mana into my ring and trying to level the playing field. After performing back-to-back rituals, I was in a bad enough state that I needed to replenish my mana too.

Wilfried is going to use Ewigeliebe’s sword soon, so I’ll need a lot of mana to preserve the shield.

After a lot of experimentation, we had confirmed that Schutzaria’s shield was weakened whenever Ewigeliebe’s sword was used nearby. Divinity-wise, the latter was presumably stronger than the former. I suspected that Dunkelfelger intended to use this knowledge for its anti-shield plan.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Leonore said, “please get in your highbeast and focus on recovering. Lord Wilfried, prepare to use Ewigeliebe’s sword when I give the signal. Brunhilde, Isidore, take turns giving Judithe more mana-filled magic tools, though take care not to deplete yourselves.”

According to both Leonore and Matthias, Judithe was essential to making this game as close to even as possible.

“Natalie, Alexis,” Leonore continued, “move so that Laurenz and Traugott can focus on Rarstark. Matthias, watch the skies.”

“Ma’am!”

Our apprentice knights flew out of our base, following their instructions.

“We will not lose simply because our blessings were stolen!” Lestilaut declared. “Go, Rarstark! Smash Ehrenfest to bits!”

“Yes, my lord!”

Dunkelfelger’s apprentice knights mounted their highbeasts and set off, enacting their own plan. I chugged a kindness-filled rejuvenation potion while spectating the battle that followed from within my Pandabus.

As per Leonore and everyone's plans, Judithe continued to attack Dunkelfelger's knights with magic tools, forcing them to increase their defenses and thereby devote less manpower to attacking. Even so, every single one of their knights was as strong as an Ehrenfest archknight. We were barely able to hold them back.

Wow. So quick...

Plus, even without their blessings, Dunkelfelger's apprentice knights were moving a little faster than our own.

"You can steal our blessings, but you cannot steal our talent for swordplay!" declared one of the enemy knights as he readied and then brought down his sword. Laurenz moved to block the attack, which told me that it was probably Rarstark.

"There's no point trying to act cool," Laurenz remarked. "You had snot pouring from your nose after Judithe hit you with our magic tool."

"S-Silence! That was *after* you were all so pitifully blinded, was it not?!"

The battle in the sky began with a series of taunts.

"The outcome of this fight will depend on whether we can keep Rarstark in place," Matthias warned. "Don't get pushed back."

Now that I'd completed Schutzaria's shield and successfully stolen Dunkelfelger's blessings, our main objective and second challenge was to contain our biggest threat, Rarstark. Matthias had said that our victory would depend on how much damage we could do now, while so many of Dunkelfelger's knights were holding back to guard their base.

"Hyaaaah!" Traugott roared, filling his sword with mana before charging at Rarstark. There was a resounding clatter as their blades met, marking the start of an intense showdown. Laurenz was flitting about, seemingly acting more as support for Traugott than a main combatant.

"Respectable enthusiasm, but how long will you last?" Rarstark jeered, effortlessly knocking away even Traugott and Laurenz's desperate joint attacks. It seemed that he was far from reaching his limit.

"They appear to be going all out right from the start," I said. "Is Traugott going to be okay?" I was a little nervous, since it seemed as though he hadn't grown at all from when his only focus had been rushing headlong into battle, but Leonore gave me a reassuring smile.

"Rarstark cannot be contained without going all out. Plus, I can assure you, Traugott *has* begun to listen to others. Once he starts slowing down, Matthias will change places with him."

The dexterous Matthias was providing support with his bow while shouting out directions to those around him. Even while his attention

was elsewhere, he always had an eye on Rarstark and was apparently ready to trade places with Traugott or Laurenz at any moment.

“I, too, will be providing support while giving instructions,” Leonore said. “Judithe, attack the enemy lines.”

From there, Leonore stopped glaring at the battlefield and moved to join the fight. I strained my eyes as I watched her leave Schutzaria’s shield, but the highbeasts in the sky were moving too fast for me to make anything out.

I wonder who’s who?

Everyone’s positions changed on a dime. I could see weapons striking each other, but I couldn’t tell the knights apart, since they were all wearing helmets. As my eyes darted across the battlefield, the only people I could recognize were Matthias as he gave instructions, and Laurenz and Traugott, since they were always sticking together.

Nobody even tried to attack Schutzaria’s shield, likely because they had seen the Sovereign Knight’s Order confirm its strength for the royal family. Their focus right now was the battle at hand; everything else could come later.

“Judithe, use this next,” Isidore said, handing her another mana-filled magic tool made by Hartmut.

Judithe flew out of the shield, then slung the magic tool at the opposing knights with a loud “Hyah!” By the time she returned, an explosion had rung out from the enemy lines, and there were screams again. Hartmut’s magic tools really were proving effective.

“Still, I’m impressed that Hartmut managed to make this many...” I said, peering into the box stuffed with magic tools.

Brunhilde smiled, having taken a pause to recover her mana. “We left the apprentice scholars exhausted and unmoving within the brewing room before coming here.”

Hartmut had made many different magic tools, and they were organized according to their destructive might. The low-level ones produced deafening noise or blinding light, like the tool that Dunkelfelger had thrown out at the start. Others produced a nauseating odor or made gross bugs fly out. They weren’t too bad, all things considered; anyone in range when one went off would only be temporarily immobilized or distracted.

Mid-level tools were those that utilized numbing or sleep powder, or that caused one’s eyes to water or nose to run uncontrollably. The tool we had used at the very beginning of the game was included in this category. They caused physical ailments, but since they were generally dependent on powders, a quick waschen worked as an effective counter. If using waschen wasn’t an immediate option, however, or if those affected took in a lot of the powder, then the effects would last much longer.

The high-level tools were apparently to be used in brutal, horrifying strategies taken from Ferdinand's reference documents. They were genuinely quite dangerous when detonated; some fired out rock shrapnel, while others produced a sequence of explosions like fireworks. The attacks from these magic tools could do serious damage if not properly shielded.

Isidore was handing over low- and mid-level tools seemingly at random, so we weren't sure what any given one would do before it exploded. Our opponents were equally unsure; all they could do was ready their shields in fear of what was to come.

For now, we don't need to worry about an attack on our base, at least.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, Wilfried's guard knight Alexis dove into Schutzaria's shield. "Heal me, please!" he shouted, falling from his highbeast and then turning back to face the battlefield, holding his arm all the while.

I followed Alexis's gaze just in time to see the Dunkelfelger apprentice knight who had been chasing him collide with Schutzaria's shield and get thrown back with great force. The burst threw him out of position, but he quickly regained his footing and returned to the battlefield; he must have understood that entering the shield wasn't an option.

After confirming that his pursuer had given up the chase, Alexis sighed in relief and removed his helmet. "Dunkelfelger's knights are much stronger than they were two years ago. They have better technique and throw us into disarray faster than expected."

"What?!" Wilfried exclaimed.

Alexis had ended up losing to an opponent whom he had at least been expected to match on his own. At the moment, Leonore's and Matthias's support was keeping the front line stable, but it seemed that it wouldn't last long.

Wilfried turned to watch the battle. I did the same. From the look of things, Ehrenfest was already struggling to stand its ground, and its position was only getting worse.

"Dunkelfelger comes across as more serious and dedicated than ever before," Wilfried remarked. "Apparently, they started playing nonstop ditter in their dormitory to gain blessings from the ritual."

"But we trained really hard as well..." Alexis muttered, frustrated.

"And our opponents trained even harder," I said. It was clear at a glance, and they really were taking the battle a lot more seriously. Their apprentice knights could obtain blessings on their own, whereas our apprentice knights couldn't.

"Not to mention," I continued, "Dunkelfelger is fielding mostly archknights. Ehrenfest, in contrast, is relying mostly on medknights. Even with mana compression on our side, there can be no avoiding

the difference in our duchies' mana quantities."

Mana compression needed to be done with some level of desperation; I could teach others my multistep method, but how much they gained from it would depend on their own efforts. Sure, our apprentice knights had gotten stronger through Bonifatius's mandatory training, but Dunkelfelger's students simply cared way more. They played ditter nigh constantly, and their skill level determined whether they would get to play in the Interduchy Tournament.

"Alexis, allow me to heal you," I said. "Then return to battle as soon as you are able."

I reached my ringed hand out the window of my Pandabus and gestured Alexis over before granting him Heilschmerz's blessing. Once the green light had healed his wounds, he chugged a rejuvenation potion in one go and then put a new one on his leather belt.

"They got me!"

This time, it was Natalie who flew over for aid. Alexis's expression hardened; he gave the empty bottle to Brunhilde, put his helmet back on, and then headed off to take Natalie's place.

"Come here, Natalie," I said. "May Heilschmerz's healing be granted."

"Thank you, Lady Rozemyne."

While I was healing Natalie, two more apprentice knights returned to our base. Dunkelfelger was largely on the defensive, and we had more active fighters, yet more and more of our apprentice knights were getting wounded. This meant fewer knights on the battlefield, putting Ehrenfest in an increasingly worse position.

"How goes the battle?" I asked.

"Not well. Matthias is fighting in my place, and Leonore in his."

In other words, Matthias and Leonore were having to observe the battlefield and give out instructions while at the same time participating in the battle themselves.

But wasn't Matthias supposed to take over from Traugott or Laurenz?!

I frantically scanned the battlefield until I spotted two ocher capes fighting one blue. Traugott had been fighting all out from the start, so he was slower than before; now, he was providing support for Laurenz instead of the other way around.

"Traugott, return to base for healing!" Laurenz's voice resounded.

"No!" Traugott roared in response. "I was ordered to hold down Rarstark with you. I cannot leave until support comes or I am ordered to do something else. Until then, I must endure!"

Traugott wasn't just being stubborn; he was acting strategically while keeping the entire battlefield in mind. Laurenz must have realized this, as he replied with a determined "Right!"

Traugott and Laurenz were still cooperating well, but with Matthias now covering for the wounded, support would never arrive. Once they were both completely exhausted, there would be nobody to contain Rarstark.

Our battle plan is falling to pieces...

Not only was our front line starting to waver, but I was stuck healing one person after another, meaning I didn't yet have all of my mana back.

This isn't good.

Still, what mattered right now was getting the apprentice knights back into the fight. I continued to aid them as they arrived, though I could feel that Dunkelfelger was slowly encroaching on us. And soon enough...

"Ehrenfest's front line is crumbling!" Lestilaut roared. "Use this chance to crush them all at once!" He must have been sure that victory was in Dunkelfelger's grasp, as he sent some of the knights defending their base to attack us instead. There was no way we would be able to hold on when we were already stretched so thin.

"Rozemyne, do you think I should go now?" Wilfried asked, eyeing the box containing Ewigeliebe's sword. "We need to heal all of our knights at once and get our front line back in order. I'll go buy some time."

"You have my full support, Brother. No matter what happens, do not stop until the ritual is complete."

"Right."

Keeping half an eye on Wilfried as he picked up Ewigeliebe's sword, I turned to those gathered in the shield and started giving out orders.

"Brunhilde, stay with Judithe and use two or three of the high-level magic tools in quick succession. After experiencing so many low- and mid-level tools, our opponents surely have their guard down. They might even call some of their knights back to defend and heal."

"Understood."

Brunhilde picked out a high-level magic tool. Judithe accepted it, looking tense, and then flew up into the air.

"Hyah!"

Again, Judithe targeted the enemy base—this time just as Dunkelfelger's reinforcements moved to enter the fray. All of our offensive tools thus far had produced sound, light, or powder, but not this one; it detonated with a thundering *boom*, unleashing violent flames and a pillar of smoke.

Hannelore shrieked, and the enemy knights all turned to the source of the commotion. Both the would-be reinforcements and those pushing back Ehrenfest were completely distracted.

“More are coming! Retreat!” one of the opposing knights cried upon seeing Judithe throw a second tool. “Their attacks are more devastating than before!”

Those in Dunkelfelger’s base readied their shields and took defensive positions just as the second tool exploded, scattering shrapnel in all directions. Those closest to the blast screamed and reeled, providing Wilfried with the perfect opportunity to act. He left Schutzaria’s shield with Ewigeliebe’s sword in hand; trying to activate it inside the shield would cause the shield to disappear.

“All of you who can fight, protect Wilfried,” I said. “Do everything in your power to ensure his ritual is not interrupted.”

“Right!”

Ewigeliebe’s sword had been preemptively filled with mana, but that still wasn’t enough to use its power as a divine instrument. It was similar to how you needed to infuse Leidenschaft’s spear with an excess of mana to make it start crackling with blue lightning.

“Isidore, prepare for rejuvenation.”

“As you will.”

Anyone who used Ewigeliebe’s sword would find themselves almost entirely drained of mana and unable to move—that was why it was crucial to have someone standing by to retrieve them. This wasn’t something we could leave to Brunhilde, so Isidore had accepted the responsibility as Wilfried’s attendant and a fellow male.

“They’re doing something!” one of the opposing knights cried. “Stop them!”

“We won’t let you!” shouted another.

Those protecting Wilfried while he channeled mana into Ewigeliebe’s sword threw nets and Hartmut’s magic tools to fend off the approaching enemies.

Over time, Ewigeliebe’s sword began to change. Its white feystone blade shone bright white, and an icy wind started to swirl around it. Pouring more mana into the sword would intensify the cold air until it turned into a whirlwind of ice and snow.

“O God of Life Ewigeliebe, ruler of restoration and death,” Wilfried prayed. “O twelve gods who serve by his side.” He was squeezing his eyes shut while gripping the sword at his chest, pointing its blade toward the heavens. The sight alone was enough to whip Dunkelfelger’s knights into a frenzy.

“Stop him!” one cried. “Don’t let him finish that prayer!”

All at once, Dunkelfelger’s knights dropped whatever they were doing to swarm Wilfried. This sudden change came as a surprise to our own knights who had been engaged in combat, but they quickly recovered and gave chase.

“Protect him!” one of our knights shouted in response. “Don’t let

them get close!”

Dunkelfelger’s apprentice knights rained arrows down on Wilfried, trying to interrupt his prayer. The surrounding knights deflected as many as they could, but one or two met their mark. Thankfully, Wilfried was wearing the charms he had received from Ferdinand, which reflected the arrows and responded with mana counterattacks.

“Hear my prayer and lend me your divine strength,” he continued, ice and snow now whirling around him. “Grant me the power to protect Geduldh from those who would steal her.”

Dunkelfelger’s apprentice knights started to back off. They could doubtless feel Ewigeliebe’s power and were on guard about what was going to happen.

“I offer thee my unwavering faith. May my highest ideals be met with praise and with lasting protection. Grant me thy divine power so that no enemies may approach.”

His prayer complete, Wilfried suddenly opened his eyes again. He was holding Ewigeliebe’s sword at the ready.



“Ehrenfest, return!”

Ehrenfest’s apprentice knights, who knew what was about to happen, instantly retreated into Schutzaria’s shield. There were so many of us that I needed to make the shield even larger, which only made it harder to maintain. It was near impossible to use Schutzaria’s shield and Ewigeliebe’s sword at the same time, so our plan really was testing my limits.

“Graaaaaah!”

Wilfried roared as he swung Ewigeliebe’s sword horizontally, putting his heart and soul into the attack. In the blink of an eye, twenty-some subordinates of the Lord of Winter appeared, all made of ice and snow, and descended on the Dunkelfelger apprentices and their base. The strength of these summons depended on the user’s mana; they were the result of an ultimate move that drained almost all of one’s mana in a single swipe.

“Guh?! What’s going on?!”

“Those are feybeasts! Cut them down! Show no hesitation!”

As the feybeasts started to attack, Wilfried collapsed into a sitting position. Isidore rushed over at once, having been waiting at the innermost edge of our shield, and started dragging his lord to safety. Only once they were back inside did Isidore start giving Wilfried kindness-filled potions.

“Have I... bought us enough time...?” Wilfried asked.

“Indeed,” I replied. “Thanks to your efforts, we can heal all of our knights. Judithe, make preparations once you have recovered. We need to attack nonstop.”

Dunkelfelger would similarly return to their base to heal after defeating the Lord of Winter’s subordinates. That would be our moment to strike.

“While they are recovering themselves, we will strike with a flurry of our most powerful attacks,” Isidore continued. “Ideally, we would also have something to destroy their rejuvenation potions.”

At the moment, Dunkelfelger’s rejuvenation potions were being closely guarded by knights in full plate armor. Their defenses were effectively impregnable, but that would change when their comrades returned to heal. Our goal was to exploit that opening and destroy their whole supply with a magic tool.

“Our next target is their rejuvenation potions?” Wilfried asked while returning Ewigeliebe’s sword to its box. “Uncle’s notes did mention the importance of destroying the enemy’s supply lines and means of rejuvenation, but... Look, I realize that we need to do this, but we can’t blame them for calling us vicious.”

“Quite,” I replied. “Ehrenfest cannot compare to Dunkelfelger’s

attack power. If their treasure were a feybeast, then we could use this opening to land a killing blow instead, but we are facing Lady Hannelore. Our safest option is to gradually wear down our opponents, and to that end, their rejuvenation potions are in our way.”

During last year’s battle between Ferdinand and Heisshtize, Hannelore hadn’t once left her base of her own will. That would presumably be the case today as well; we would need to get up close, ensnare her with light from our schtappes, and drag her out.

“We’re almost there!” one of the enemy knights shouted. “Take them down!”

“Those who need to heal, start getting in line!”

The winter feybeasts had come from Wilfried’s mana alone; defeating them all would take our opponents some time, but it wouldn’t be very difficult if they worked together. It wasn’t long before their knights began returning to heal.

“Now!” Leonore cried. She and Judithe flew up above the battlefield, armed with the high-level magic tools that Brunhilde had given them, and then launched successive attacks on the enemy base. The tools exploded on impact, sending the knights being healed into a panic.

“Gaaah! Our rejuvenation potions!”

“How many are intact?!”

“Another’s coming! Shields! Get ready!”

“Close the boxes first!”

Dunkelfelger wasn’t having a good time.

“Rozemyne! This is reprehensible!” Lestilaut bellowed, incensed.

“You would call yourself a saint after such a craven display?!”

I couldn’t recall ever calling myself a saint. Plus, according to Ferdinand, the blame rightfully lay with those who had so foolishly let down their guard. I thought that was true... but at the same time, I thought Ferdinand was at fault for having inspired such a move in the first place.

Basically, what I’m trying to say is: you can’t blame me for this.

“Aim for the slinger throwing those magic tools!” Lestilaut ordered. “Destroy her thoroughly. Ensure that she can bother us no more!”

Throughout the battle thus far, Dunkelfelger had prioritized our strongest knights over Judithe, as they had simply been able to block her attacks with their shields. Now that her magic tools were causing massive damage, however, something needed to be done.

“She always leaves Ehrenfest’s shield before attacking. Her magic tool would no doubt be reflected otherwise. Do not miss that opportunity!”

“Yes, my lord!”

Judithe recoiled upon hearing Lestilaut’s command, then began to tremble. Lestilaut wasn’t participating in the fight himself and was instead waiting at his duchy’s base, keeping a close eye on the whole battlefield. His position had allowed him to make some very keen observations.

Lestilaut then added that I was to be targeted as well. “Rozemyne performed a sequence of rituals at the start of our game and has been maintaining a shield ever since, on top of casting healing magic. She must not have recovered much mana. Give her no room to breathe; focus on her shield until you break through. I intend to use you-know-what.”

He also mentioned that I had drunk a rejuvenation potion after taking so many hits from the Sovereign Knight’s Order.

“Lady Rozemyne, is all that true?” Leonore asked.

I nodded. Healing the knights and maintaining Schutzaria’s shield, especially in the presence of Ewigeliebe’s sword, had taken a lot out of me—and this had all taken place before my mana could even fully recover from the rituals. I had actively avoided healing myself, since I had assumed that could wait until everyone was back on the front line.

“I still have enough to maintain the shield and my highbeast,” I said, “and I expect to be able to endure some attacks... but if Dunkelfelger launches an all-out offensive, I will not last long.”

The Sovereign Knight’s Order had drained a lot of my mana when investigating the strength of my shield. Our opponents right now were mere apprentices, but after seeing them so swiftly cut down our feybeasts, it was clear that I couldn’t lower my guard.

“Lady Rozemyne, running out of mana...?”

The apprentice knights still gathered in Schutzaria’s shield all exchanged worried glances. I understood the feeling of abruptly losing one’s safety net, but still. Dunkelfelger wasn’t using Schutzaria’s shield; instead, its knights were all defending themselves individually.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Wilfried said, standing up. “We just need to take down as many of Dunkelfelger’s apprentice knights as we can. We’ve all received Rozemyne’s healing and are recovering as we speak. Now, we just need to protect her and give her time to replenish her mana. That’s no different from what we’ve been doing so far, right?”

“Right, my lord!”

Just moments ago, Ehrenfest had been completely overwhelmed to the point that our front line had crumbled. We all understood that wearing down an opponent as numerous and capable as Dunkelfelger wouldn’t be easy... but even so, our apprentice knights were all riled

up.

“Protect the Saint of Ehrenfest! Don’t let the enemy near our shield!”

It seemed that Lestilaut had a plan to conquer Schutzaria’s shield. To keep Dunkelfelger’s apprentice knights from getting too close, our own knights took to the battlefield with magic tools in hand.

Only four of us were going to remain inside the shield: Judithe, Brunhilde, Isidore, and me. Wilfried was leaving with the others, also with a magic tool at the ready, saying that archduke candidates had to take the lead at times like this. He had gotten that attitude from Sylvester, in my opinion.

“We will protect you, Lady Rozemyne.”

I watched the knights leave, then brushed my fingers against the potions hanging from my belt. Among them was the ultra-nasty one.

Should I...? I need to recover my mana, but...

Having more mana meant more options, which would be helpful... but at the same time, I’d already drunk a kindness-infused potion; drinking an ultra-nasty one on top of that would be dangerous. Considering how closely Rihyarda and Hartmut managed my potion consumption, it wasn’t as simple as chugging one whenever I needed mana.

Plus, drinking more than I can manage would absolutely outrage Ferdinand.

I was already using a lot of mana to maintain my highbeast and the shield, and with my current recovery rate, I wouldn’t be able to endure a coordinated attack from Dunkelfelger. The ultra-nasty potion would greatly help me in this regard—but consuming it now risked me recovering *too much* mana, which would be as problematic as during the Dedication Ritual.

Let’s keep this as a last resort.

We hadn’t yet confirmed whether Lestilaut really had a secret plan for destroying our shield. My decision could wait until they made their move. I took my hand away from the potion and focused on the battlefield; an intense clash was about to begin.

“CHAAARGE! Knock them all down!”

“Don’t let them get close!”

Knights flew from either base and charged to the center of the battlefield. The blue-capes were in a tight clump, while our own other-capes moved to engulf them, providing a colorful contrast.

“I’ll go provide support,” Judithe told me, then darted outside the shield. She had in her hand a high-level magic tool given to her by Brunhilde, which she then slung at the faraway mass of enemy knights.

“Dodge it!”

The blue swarm heading toward us noticed the magic tool and scattered in all directions. The tool missed them entirely, instead hitting the ground and exploding quite harmlessly, after which the knights returned to their blob-like formation.

“All at once!” Wilfried called.

Ehrenfest’s spread-out apprentice knights began throwing magic tools of their own, causing explosions that kicked up thick clouds of dust all across the battlefield. Some of the approaching blue-capes were knocked from their highbeasts or got blown away by the blast, but that didn’t stop the approaching mass; with Rarstark at their core, they dodged magic tools while zigzagging forward, continuously scattering and reforming as they charged.

“Rarstark!” Lestilaut shouted.

In sequence, Rarstark’s sword began to shine a complex rainbow of colors. It was the large-scale mana attack that Ferdinand often used when taking down massive feybeasts—one so powerful that even its shockwaves were lethal—and it was being directed straight at me.

The blood drained from my face.

“Are they sane?!” Wilfried yelled.

I was in wholehearted agreement. Desperately, I started channeling all of my recovering mana into Schutzaria’s shield. I’d never experienced being hit with such a serious attack before.

I’ll die! Taking that head-on will kill me for sure!

The attack wasn’t quite as bright as the one Cornelius had used to finish the ditter match two years ago. Rarstark was probably holding back somewhat—his performance thus far made it clear that he was capable of more. Not that that made me feel any safer.

“DODGE IF YOU WANT TO LIIIVE!” Rarstark roared as he swung down his sword. An imposing light shot forth, heading straight for our base, swirling with all sorts of complex colors.

Ehrenfest’s apprentice knights held up their geteilt-made shields to defend against the attack, but the shockwave alone scattered them with ease. Indeed, the monstrous light blew through all obstacles in its path as it shot toward me. Brunhilde, having never experienced a battle like this before, let out a high-pitched squeak before fainting into a heap on the ground. Isidore similarly dropped, his head in his hands.

Judithe was the only person in the shield still able to guard me. She was standing in front of me, her back turned to the light, spreading her cape in an attempt to keep me safe. “This is the most I can do...” she said—though her voice was dwarfed by the crackling and screeching of Schutzaria’s shield.

Rarstark’s attack had reached our defenses. Even with Judithe’s cape blocking my view, my vision went pure white. A deafening roar

assaulted my ears, and the mana needed to maintain the shield was sucked out of me all at once.

My only focus was channeling mana into Schutzaria's shield. Brunhilde was unconscious, Isidore was in the fetal position, and Judithe was standing in the path of a terrifying attack. I couldn't afford to collapse; too many people were at risk.

I wasn't sure how long the clash between light and shield endured. Was it mere seconds, or much longer? All I knew was that, eventually, the light disappeared, and shapes and colors slowly returned to my vision. My ears were ringing so much that everything sounded muted, but I could make out the din of combat somewhere in the distance.

Judithe was still standing with her cape spread out in front of me. We were both gazing upward, albeit from different angles.

"Ah..."

I suddenly dropped to the ground. My highbeast had vanished, and its feystone landed at my fingertips. Maybe I'd been too focused on maintaining the shield, or maybe I'd simply run out of mana.

"Is it over...?" Judithe asked, dazed, still spreading her cape to protect me.

I stood, looked to the sky, then nodded. "Schutzaria's shield is still there. It must be over."

We both sighed and smiled at each other—but then a shadow darkened the earth between us.

"Wha...?"

I turned my attention back to the skies, surprised that something was right above us. There was a highbeast over our shield with its wings spread, though not for long—it disappeared a moment later, leaving Lestilaut in its place. He was falling toward us, a large black shield attached to his left arm.

"Eep?!"

There was no way that Lestilaut, an enemy knight, would be able to enter our shield during a game of ditte. He would naturally be knocked back... and yet, he somehow made it through, forcing his way inside from behind his black shield.

"B-But how?!" I exclaimed, looking between Lestilaut and our shield. Some of my mana had been sucked out, but our defenses were still standing strong.

Lestilaut dropped down from above, his armor clattering as he stuck a nimble landing.

In an instant, Judithe moved to protect me. "Stay behind me, Lady Rozemyne," she said, morphing her schtappe into a sword while sizing up her opponent. Before she could even attempt to strike, however, she was forced out of the shield.

“Ah?!”

A grin crept onto Lestilaut's face as he watched Judithe's struggle to reenter. “Schutzaria refuses entry to all those who intend to cause harm, does she not? As we have seen before, even those already inside the shield will find themselves ejected if they attempt an attack.”

Now, the only other people in the shield with me were Brunhilde, Isidore, and Lestilaut. Judithe was stuck outside because she intended to harm Lestilaut.

“Lord Lestilaut, how did you get through the shield...?” I asked, taking a step back.

He raised an eyebrow at me. “Is it not obvious? I possess no malice.”

That was a lie. Malice or no, he was my enemy in the context of our game; no way would the shield have allowed him through. A large, black shield gleamed on his arm; he had presumably drained enough mana from my shield to create a hole for him to slip through.

“It was that black shield, wasn't it?” I asked.

“Correct,” Lestilaut said pridefully, stroking the item in question. “This shield is made of the highest-quality Darkness feystones imaginable; there is no better means of defending against mana attacks. It can even pass through walls of mana, as you have now seen. It is one of our duchy's hidden treasures, sent by our aub so that we could counter your shield.”

Just as we had borrowed a divine instrument from our aub, Lestilaut had borrowed that black shield from his. He went on to note that they couldn't allow Hannelore to be stolen by Ehrenfest so easily.

“Aah!” Judithe cried. During our brief conversation, she had been surrounded by enemy knights and captured in bands of light.

“Judithe!”

“How about getting rid of your shield,” Lestilaut suggested. “Then your allies would actually be able to reach you.”

I bit my lip. A single glance was enough to see that nobody was around to help Judithe. There were blue-capes surrounding Schutzaria's shield with their schtappes in hand, ready to bind me with light the moment I lowered our defenses. Maintaining the shield would keep out the other knights seeking to capture me, but it would also stop my allies from coming to my aid. It would mean dealing with Lestilaut myself, either by forcing him out or generally defeating him.

Oh no... I don't have any mana to spare.

I knew better than anyone how helpless I was without mana. I couldn't use any fighting techniques, and although I was healthier now, I was still prone to collapsing after too much exertion.

I took another step back. Lestilaut and I were positioned an equal

distance away from the box containing our magic tools, in what was effectively an isosceles triangle. Trying to reach the box was an option, but it was likely that Lestilaut would get there before me—and considering the risk that he might push it out of the shield or otherwise destroy it, I determined that it was safer to do something else.

While I was desperately evaluating my chances and searching for a means to attack, Lestilaut started closing the distance between us, step by step.

“Rarstark has personally knocked aside more than half of your knights,” he said. “The remainder are struggling against a portion of our forces. Now that your shield no longer serves its purpose, the battle has been decided.” He reached out to me, offering me his hand, which was large enough to belong to an adult. “Take my hand, Rozemyne.”

Lestilaut couldn’t attack me while we were within the shield, nor could he take me by force. In other words, the battle wouldn’t be decided unless I took his hand and willingly left our base.

I glared up at Lestilaut, my eyes flitting between his open hand and victorious expression. “No way.” I wasn’t about to resign—to surrender to Dunkelfelger of my own volition. It genuinely angered me that he was trying to make this the finale. I wasn’t going to choose his duchy over my own. Not now, not ever.

Lestilaut blinked a few times, momentarily surprised by my answer, then adjusted his position and flourished his cape. “This tough act of yours does have its appeal, but the more obstinate you are, the more harm will come to your knights.”

His theatrical gesture had given me a good view of the battle outside the shield. My guard knights were embroiled in a desperate struggle, fighting to the last breath to protect me.

“Rozemyne!” Wilfried yelled, his voice clear above the racket. He was swinging his sword at one of the opposing knights, engaged in combat.

Not a single person had given up—and with that realization, my own chances of surrendering evaporated completely. Everyone’s efforts filled me with a single, simple urge: to win.

“I didn’t want to have to do this, but...”

I took the ultra-nasty potion from my belt and pressed the feystone on the top to open it. The awful stench made me groan instinctively; it had been so long since I’d last tasted one of these potions that my body was actively fighting against it.

“Rozemyne, you... What are you about to drink?” Lestilaut asked, his previously confident eyes now tinged with uncertainty.

In one fell swoop, I downed the entire potion.

“Nghhhhhh!”

The intense bitterness numbed my tongue, and a foul stench hit the back of my throat. It was all too much to bear, and I fell to the ground with my hands covering my mouth. Tears started to blur my vision as I writhed in agony.

I might die before I win!

“Was that poison?!” Lestilaut exclaimed. He sprinted over at once and dropped to his knees in front of me.

No! It's not poison! It's medicine! Technically speaking...!

I wanted to protest, but my body wouldn't let me; I could only lie there with my hands clasped over my mouth and tears welling from my eyes, enduring the horrible taste. My mana recovered with haste, and some of the tension left my shoulders. My flailing had really impacted my stamina, but that recovered too.

As I remained on the ground, limp and motionless, waiting for my body to recover, Lestilaut nervously went to touch my cheek. His hand was knocked away with a quiet *pop*. Although his black shield was stopping him from being thrown out of our defenses, the charms that Ferdinand had made for me still took effect.

“Are you really so against moving to Dunkelfelger, Rozemyne...?” Lestilaut murmured, spiritless.

“Of course,” I replied, slowly opening my eyes. “You know, Lord Lestilaut... I haven't lost yet.”

Lestilaut watched in shock as I stood up and brushed the grass and dirt from my hair and clothes. My mana had recovered.

“Wilfried! I can handle things here!” I shouted. “Go steal Lady Hannelore!”

It was the perfect opening—he had just defeated the apprentice knight trying to stop him and was closer to Hannelore than anyone else from Ehrenfest. Meanwhile, most of our opponents were gathered around Schutzaria's shield, cocksure, eager for a chance to capture me.

“I entrust Ehrenfest's victory to you!” I cried. “*Lanze!*”

In the blink of an eye, Leidenschaft's spear appeared in my hand, crackling with blue lightning. I had no intention of using a divine instrument against Hannelore, but against Lestilaut? I saw no reason to hold back.

Lestilaut held up his black shield, on guard against the divine instrument. Some of his comrades flew off to protect Hannelore, while others stayed in place, enraptured by Leidenschaft's spear.

I was holding my newly formed weapon in both hands—and without issue, I might add, since it was a transformation of my shtappe and therefore weighed nothing at all. My target was Lestilaut's black shield, the one thing keeping him from being thrown

out of our defenses.

“Hyaaaah!”

I cried out, lunging forward with my spear. I wasn’t trained in the art of combat, so I was limited to the most basic attacks. Lestilaut dodged with ease, so I swung my already thrust-out spear sideways toward him. I didn’t care how crude I was being. As long as I got him, my efforts would surely do something.

“Hyah! Hyah!”

“This is the clumsiest spear fighting I have ever seen,” Lestilaut commented, “but your weapon certainly is dangerous.”

My lack of skill aside, it went without saying that a divine spear was dangerous beyond words; Lestilaut couldn’t risk letting it touch him.

After several more unsuccessful attacks, my random swinging finally paid off and scored a hit against the black shield. The two collided with a loud, metallic *clank*, then there came a violent *boom* as mana struck mana. The surface of the black shield exploded with light, while Lestilaut, caught off guard by the unexpected development, knocked my spear aside.

“The spear...” he said, looking at my weapon in disbelief. Its blue lightning had vanished, indicating that it was now drained. I stared at the shield attached to his left arm in similar astonishment.

The center part seems to be turning into gold dust.

The black shield was no longer black; instead, it was now dyed a light yellow color, having absorbed all of the mana from Leidenschaft’s spear. It was starting to crumble from the center outward, turning to dust from where my attack had struck.

Lestilaut followed my eyes to his shield, then yelped. “Rozemyne, you... What have you done?!” He fixed me with a ferocious glare, and in the blink of an eye, he was flung out of Schutzaria’s shield as if carried away by the wind.

From outside our defenses, he roared, “ROZEMYNE! THIS SHIELD IS A TREASURE OF DUNKELFELGER!” All the while, his shield continued to deteriorate. It was far from my first time turning something to dust through mana saturation; there was no helping it now.

“So you say, but was it not obvious that exposing Geduldh would end with her being stolen by Flutrane? This seems to me like an incident invited by Ewigeliebe’s carelessness.”

I sighed in relief and cast rucken to dispel my spear. Lestilaut tried to attack Schutzaria’s shield out of anger, only to be knocked back again. I had succeeded in expelling our enemy.

“Now, Ehrenfest will not lose,” I said. “The outcome of this battle depends on whether Wilfried can coax Lady Hannelore out of her

base...”

“Something is coming from above!” Hirschur suddenly cried from the audience, where she was serving as a judge. “Everyone, be careful!”

I turned to look and spotted countless figures in the sky over the arena. They descended on us, letting out war cries.

Intruders

“What are those...?”

“We are in the middle of dinner!”

I was starting to wonder whether the new arrivals had mistaken this for a training session when several offensive magic tools rained down on the battlefield. This was an attack, no two ways about it. The apprentice knights raised their geteil-made shields above their heads to protect themselves.

The figures who swooped into the arena weren't just from a single duchy. Among them were orange- and dark-purple-capes, all armed and armored.

“The Saint of Ehrenfest belongs to the victor!” one of the intruders announced. “We won't let Dunkelfelger have her!”

“HOW DARE YOU INTERFERE!” Lestilaut roared, furious beyond words that our game was being interrupted. His comrades shared in his outrage; they gripped their weapons and shot up into the sky on their highbeasts.

“Have you forgotten that your previous union of middle and lesser duchies failed to even scratch us?!”

The intruders' bombardment continued. It was impossible to tell what they were thinking or how much they had prepared. We also couldn't predict whether Dunkelfelger would immediately return to attacking us after stomping them. For that reason...

“Ehrenfest, return to base!” I called. “Bring the wounded with you!”

Healing comes first.

The battle against Dunkelfelger had taken a toll on our apprentice knights; some were lying on the battlefield, unable to move. Helping them took priority over dealing with the intruders. Besides, we weren't much of a fighting threat at the present moment.

In response to my call, our apprentice knights started returning to the safety of our shield. Those who were able to move freely retrieved those who were not. Judithe was brought in as well, still restrained; the bands around her could only be cut by someone with more mana than their caster. I swiftly used messer to free her.

“I'm so sorry...” Judithe said. “I—”

“That can come later,” I replied, interrupting her. “For now, hurry to make sure no wounded have been left behind.”

Her violet eyes, which had just moments ago been stripped of their luster, suddenly lit up again. Any thoughts of her shortcomings had been pushed aside now that she had a job to do. After sharply voicing her acknowledgment, she flourished her cape and went off on her highbeast.

It wasn't long before Wilfried returned as well—though he wasn't alone. "Rozemyne, can we shield Lady Hannelore here too?" he asked. "Her own duchy abandoned her in their base."

"You are more than welcome here, Lady Hannelore," I replied. "What were your knights thinking, leaving an archduke candidate on her own?! Your safety clearly comes before dealing with the intruders." I glared up at the blue-cape still dealing with the rain of magic tools, all the while making space for Wilfried and Hannelore.

"This must be enough to warrant putting our game on hold," Wilfried said. "We can't keep up like this."

"I expect that Dunkelfelger intends to continue the match after crushing them, but you are right—we are in no position for that. We have used most of our magic tools and consumed too many of our rejuvenation potions." I cast *streitkolben* to turn my *schtappe* into Flutrane's staff and then spoke the prayer necessary to heal everyone in the shield at once: "May Heilschmerz's healing be granted."

A pillar of green light shot up into the sky. By now, this was a familiar sight for Dunkelfelger's and our own apprentice knights—but not for our intruders. They immediately began to stir.

After analyzing our situation with cool composure, I turned to those safely inside our shield. Brunhilde was finally regaining consciousness. She shakily returned to her feet, grimaced at the dirt and grass clinging to her hair, then swiftly cleaned herself with a *waschen*.

Oh, right... Nobles don't brush themselves off with their hands.

In mere seconds, Brunhilde was looking like her usual self again, carrying herself so gracefully that it was hard to believe there was a battle raging around us. Once again, it was clear that she was the superior noblewoman and that my instincts betrayed my absolute lack of elegance.

All of a sudden, for the briefest moment, my vision began to flicker.

"Wha...?"

It really had only lasted for an instant, but the message was loud and clear: my body was protesting the way I was mistreating it. I wouldn't be able to cling to consciousness for too much longer; we needed to end this chaos as soon as possible. I moved to address the apprentice knights. They had been healed, but their mana hadn't yet recovered.

“Everyone, use your rejuvenation potions,” I said. “Then check to see how many magic tools and potions remain, and—”

My instructions were cut short by a sudden “No!” from the audience, followed shortly thereafter by high-pitched screams. I turned to the source of the commotion and saw one of Dunkelfelger’s apprentice knights without their highbeast, plummeting toward the ground, unconscious. He struck the earth with a dull *thud*, then remained eerily still.

“I must help him!” I shouted. “Guards!”

Upon seeing me touch the feystone for my Pandabus, Judithe instantly created her shield. Leonore produced and mounted her own highbeast, then looked around and started scolding the guard knights who had yet to spring into action.

“Matthias, Laurenz! Do not idle!”

I climbed into Lessy, then made my way over to the unconscious knight. Ideally, I wanted to bring him into Schutzaria’s shield. Feystone armor offered a lot of protection against sudden impacts, but he had fallen from a great height; he had probably taken a blow to the head, and moving him in that state would be dangerous.

“Lady Rozemyne, you would risk your safety to help a Dunkelfelger apprentice?!”

“Of course! There is a wounded person before me—someone I can save!”

After reaching the knight, I climbed out of my highbeast and used my ring to grant him Heilschmerz’s healing—with my own knights guarding me with their shields, of course. A small green light rained down on him, at which point Laurenz muttered, “Someone tell me this isn’t happening...”

Not just Laurenz, but every single one of my guard knights was gazing skyward. I tried to follow their eyes, and that was when I realized—even the Dunkelfelger students here to spectate our game were starting to join the free-for-all.

“Give me a break...” Matthias sighed, almost sounding fearful. “Those from Dunkelfelger can hold their own, sure, but what if the rest of the audience gets dragged into the fight?”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the intruders’ offensive magic tools started targeting the spectator seats.

“They’re not part of this!” I shouted.

Dunkelfelger had scholars and attendants of the sword who were capable of protecting themselves—in fact, most of them had already created shields—but the Ehrenfest spectators weren’t combatants. Some were exhausted apprentice scholars who had pushed themselves to their limit brewing magic tools, others were apprentice attendants who knew how to make shields but didn’t have enough combat

training to use them, and still others were the younger apprentice knights who knew a bit about fighting but hadn't yet been able to play ditler. And, of course, there was also Charlotte, our third archduke candidate.

"Charlotte!" I cried. But just as I was getting hysterical, Wilfried started giving out orders from within the shield.

"All recovered apprentice knights, move to protect our duchy's spectators! Bring them here! Those who have yet to recover, stay here and guard our base!"

"Understood!"

The apprentice knights who were battle-ready mounted their highbeasts and rushed to the stands with their shields in hand. I told myself that everything was going to be okay—that our noncombatants would be much easier to protect once they were inside Schutzaria's shield—and focused on healing the wounded person in front of me.

"I... I..."

The unconscious apprentice knight began to murmur. He came to, then leapt to his feet so suddenly that it startled me.

"You've been unconscious for some time," I said, tugging on his cape. "You need to rest, and..."

"You need not worry," he interjected. "Your saintly blessing has healed my wounds. I thank you from the bottom of my heart." He knelt to show his appreciation, then climbed onto his highbeast and returned to the sky.

On the one hand, I was glad that he was better... but on the other, I was a little dazed. He was so eager to leave the safety of our shield and return to battle that I had to wonder whether he had needed healing in the first place.

As I watched his retreating back, my vision flickered again. This time, everything had turned monochrome, like the world had been sapped of all color. It was probably the result of my rampant mana usage, on top of drinking two different kinds of rejuvenation potion back-to-back.

"You do not look well," Leonore said to me. "Let us return to the shield. Ride with me." She picked me up and started toward our base, her expression stiff. "Do you need a rejuvenation—"

"No, I have already consumed too many."

Leonore held me a little closer. Abandoning the fight and taking me back to the dormitory wasn't an option; Charlotte and the other noncombatants were being taken to our base, and their safety depended on Schutzaria's shield.

We returned to find that Wilfried was trying to stop the free-for-all going on above us by any means necessary. "Lady Hannelore, it seems inevitable that this game of ditler is going to be nullified," he said.

“Can you ease everyone’s fighting spirit with the ritual of the Goddess of Oceans?”

“Indeed,” she replied, having been watching the sky with a sorrowful expression. “I see no issue with that; this game is as good as over.”

“In that case, Lady Hannelore, while you are performing the ritual, we will produce a large-scale waschen to ensure that no attacks interrupt you. Isidore, Brunhilde—your mana has recovered, right?” He got Isidore to fetch the support magic tool that Hartmut had made for us based on Clarissa’s research, then asked some of the nearby knights to start guarding Hannelore.

The next thing we knew, there was a loud, metallic *clang*.

“Eep!”

“Wha?!”

Wilfried and I cried out in surprise, while the surrounding apprentice knights all readied themselves and stared upward. Even the knights who had been fighting in the sky stopped and straightened their backs.

“ATTENTIOON!” boomed Rauffen’s voice, echoing throughout the arena. “Why is the Sovereign Knight’s Order here at the Royal Academy?! And interfering with a game of *ditter*, of all things?! We didn’t ask you to come, and we’ve confirmed via *ordonnanz* that the royal family didn’t either!”

His outrage was unmistakable—and, indeed, a closer inspection revealed that there were several black capes among the rainbow that made up our intruders. I’d thought that interfering with one of Dunkelfelger’s *ditter* games was a pretty bold move, but they evidently had the support of the Sovereign Knight’s Order.

“The royal family was concerned about Dunkelfelger potentially taking the Saint of Ehrenfest,” one of the black-caped knights explained, his voice commanding. “Dealing with such concerns is the duty of the Sovereign Knight’s Order.”

Knights from the lesser and middle duchies that had evidently been rallied into joining the battle voiced their agreement.

“This is what the royal family wants.”

“If we win, we obtain the Saint of Ehrenfest.”

“You would attack on such a flimsy basis, without a royal decree?!” Rauffen yelled, in complete disbelief. “This is clearly abnormal!”

“The Sovereign Knight’s Order serves the Zent himself,” the black-caped knight declared. “We work to ease his distress. We eliminate all those who oppose him. And that includes you!”

At once, the overconfident knight moved to strike Rauffen. The very sight of a Sovereign knight attacking a professor of the Royal

Academy—someone who had similarly moved to the Sovereignty and wore the same black cape—had stunned us all. Rauffen alone was lucid; he dodged the attack, then turned to the invading students.

“Everyone, stand down at once! I’ve personally confirmed that this attack is *not* part of a royal decree! If you support the Sovereign Knight’s Order knowing this, then you will *not* be protected! Flee before the royal family arrives!”

It was clear now that the attackers *weren’t* acting on behalf of the royal family and would most likely be punished for their actions. Upon hearing this, the invading apprentice knights from middle and lesser duchies scattered like baby spiders, clearing the sky in an instant. All that remained were three black-caped Sovereign knights and the blue-cape of Dunkelfelger.

“Interrupting ditter without a royal decree is unprecedented behavior!” Lestilaut shouted. “Bind them at once! Have them explain themselves before the Zent!”

Dunkelfelger’s apprentice knights acted without hesitation, fighting to capture the black-caped knights... but the Sovereign Knight’s Order was made up of the country’s very best—those who had been allowed to move to the Sovereignty after having their skills recognized. Against such capable opponents, not even Dunkelfelger’s apprentices stood a chance.

In addition to all this, to restrain someone with a schtappe, one needed to have more mana than the person being captured. The only person here able to restrain the rogue knights was Lestilaut, an archduke candidate approaching adulthood. He waited for one of the knights to be cornered by Rauffen and several of the apprentices, then swiftly bound him with light.

“Lady Rozemyne, could you not bind them too?” Hannelore asked.

“Unfortunately, that would require me to get closer. I also don’t have the mana to spare, since I need to maintain Schutzaria’s shield.”

There was no reason for anyone to expect anything of me at this point. I might have been able to help if my mana were replenished, but right now, I couldn’t even bear to keep focusing on our shield. I was starting to feel uncomfortably nauseous, like I might hurl at any moment. To be frank, I didn’t want to expend a drop more mana.

And as I glared up at the sky, several more black-cape arrived. Their uniform movements were no doubt those of the Sovereign Knight’s Order. I tensed up on instinct, thinking that perhaps they were reinforcements.

“I came here at once upon receiving Rauffen’s ordonnanz, and what do I see?!” came Anastasius’s voice from among the new arrivals. “What is the meaning of this?!”

It seemed that the intruders really had been acting without orders

from the royal family. Anastasius bound the two remaining rogue black-capes, who had since been cornered, without even breaking a sweat. That was a prince for you; he had tons of mana.

"I wish to hear your cases," Anastasius said. "Archduke candidates of Dunkelfelger and Ehrenfest, stay here with your retainers and dormitory supervisors! Everyone else, disperse!"

I would have rather he scheduled this for another day, but he had received an urgent summons from Rauffen and wanted to get a clear picture of what had taken place here.

Anastasius's appearance had brought the battle to an immediate end, which was a relief—but at the same time, the calmer atmosphere allowed my weariness to surge. I tried getting rid of Schutzaria's shield, dispersing the last thing that was draining my mana, but doing that just made me feel worse. Nothing was working to make me better.

Collapsing in front of the royal family isn't good, right? What should I do?

"Milady!" Rihyarda shouted the moment she saw me, having come down with Charlotte and the others. She raced over and said, "Oh, there is death on your face. We must return to the dormitory at once. Leave things here to Wilfried and Lady Charlotte."

"But Prince Anastasius ordered me to stay. Leaving now would mean defying an order from the royal family."

Rihyarda shook her head, looking stern. "Collapsing in front of the royal family once again would be even worse. Let us explain our reasoning first, then return."

At her prompting, I asked Anastasius if we could return to our dormitory. He grimaced the moment he saw me, as if recalling an unpleasant memory of some kind, then shooed me away.

"I can tell from looking at you that you are unwell," he said. "Hurry back to your dormitory."

"I thank you. Your magnanimous heart fills me with gratitude," I replied, kneeling while holding back the urge to vomit.

Anastasius gave an even more irritated look. "Someone, take her away already!"

Rihyarda picked me up at once.

"Leonore, Matthias, Brunhilde, Roderick... Between you, you witnessed the game from the battlefield, our shield, and the stands... Speak to Prince Anastasius in my stead..." I ordered while being carried away. I could see Anastasius's exasperated expression from over Rihyarda's shoulder.

Upon our return to the dormitory, Rihyarda launched into a scolding.

“I saw from above; you used more than the agreed number of rejuvenation potions, didn’t you? I understand that you couldn’t afford to lose, but you *must* be more careful. The apprentice knights can depend on your healing *and* their rejuvenation potions. You can only depend on the latter, and even then, there are limits to how many you can consume.”

The apprentice knights could chug several rejuvenation potions, since they found even the weaker versions to be plenty effective. In contrast, I was limited to using Ferdinand-brand potions; anything less did effectively nothing to replenish my mana. On top of that, I could only drink so many in quick succession, as too many potions would make me feel sick.

“As you have likely drunk more rejuvenation potions than your body can manage, I cannot allow you to drink any more,” Rihyarda concluded. “All you can do now is rest until your symptoms go away.”

Rihyarda and Lieseleta quickly helped me to get changed, then forced me into bed. I slowly shut my eyes; at last, after such an exhausting day, I was able to get some rest.

Epilogue

At about the same time that Rozemyne was carried away by her head attendant, the students in the audience began filtering out as well. Left behind were the other archduke candidates, their retainers, and the dormitory supervisors.

Hannelore was still at Ehrenfest's base, where Schutzaria's shield previously stood, waiting among a sea of ocher capes. She could only watch as Rozemyne slowly disappeared from view.

To think she would end up in such a state... Just how far was she pushing herself during our game?

Rozemyne's sickly pallor was a stark contrast to the radiance she had exuded when facing down Lestilaut just moments prior, or when defending against the attacks of the entire Sovereign Knight's Order. Now, she looked ashen, on the verge of passing out. Had she been maintaining her shield through sheer willpower? Hannelore let out an awed sigh at the thought.

No matter how you approach it, Lady Rozemyne needed healing so much more than our apprentice she helped.

Once the noisy crowds had dispersed, the only ones who remained were those whom Anastasius had asked to stay. They formed a triangle with black, blue, and ocher corners, and the dormitory supervisors stepped forward as representatives. The three infiltrators, all tightly bound, were tossed into the center.

"Hannelore! You should be over here!" Lestilaut called out, signaling for her return with a quick jerk of his thumb. It was only then that Hannelore noticed everyone standing in groups; in her confusion, she alone had ended up with the wrong duchy.

Wilfried attempted to ease her panic. "Don't worry, Lady Hannelore. Lord Lestilaut will understand that you only came to us and entered Schutzaria's shield to escape the danger."

Despite those kind words, Hannelore offered only a polite smile in response. Such a weak excuse simply wouldn't hold water; she had willingly left Dunkelfelger's base and made her duchy lose as a result.

Lestilaut's decision to lead the apprentice knights to chase off the intruders had meant that Hannelore was all alone in their base. As her team's treasure, she was unable to move. Thankfully, the abundance of mana she wielded as an archduke candidate meant that she could

block any attack with a full-powered geteilt. She had also been given offensive magic tools to chase away any enemies who attempted to approach. It was her duty to watch the battle from afar and play defensively, so when the invading duchies' attack magic started raining down from the sky, she produced her geteilt and took cover in its shadow.

"Lady Hannelore!" Wilfried shouted as he flew over to her. He was carrying a shield of his own, which he was using to block the attacks coming from above.

Hannelore slowly reached down and touched one of the many magic tools she had with her.

"It's too dangerous for you to be here without any guards," Wilfried continued. "Come to Ehrenfest. You'll be safer inside Rozemyne's shield."

Hannelore's eyes widened. To her surprise, Wilfried wasn't here to encourage her to resign; he was genuinely worried about her, showing no ulterior motives. Even so, she shook her head.

"But I cannot leave this base— Eep!"

Before she could finish her response, Wilfried stopped an attack from the sky with his shield, letting out a grunt of exertion. He then gave Hannelore a reassuring smile, extended a hand to her, and said, "I would not say this if our battle were still only between our two duchies. However, we now have intruders to deal with, and our game can't continue after such an interruption. Please, Lady Hannelore. Think of your safety above all else."

She gazed up at the blue-capes, who were fighting to keep the intruders of so many duchies from reaching the ground. They were clearly furious about their game being interrupted and were working their hardest to remove the sudden threat.

The bombardment of magic attacks made it clear that the invaders' objective wasn't to join the ditter game; their only focus was stopping Dunkelfelger from obtaining the Saint of Ehrenfest. A glance over at Rauffen was enough to see that he was entirely preoccupied with their unwanted guests. He hadn't announced that the game was canceled or even paused.

Just by looking at Wilfried—by staring into his deep-green eyes and seeing his outstretched hand—Hannelore could tell that he cared more about her safety than any game of ditter. He was wielding a shield and nothing more; there were no weapons or magic tools in his hands.

"If our game is canceled, then we can simply resume it some other time," he said. "But if you get hurt? The consequences could be devastating."

Hannelore knew that she could easily blow Wilfried away using

the offensive magic tools she had been given. They were powerful enough to pose a genuine risk to anyone on the receiving end of one... yet Wilfried didn't seem concerned about that in the slightest.

His only thoughts are about my safety.

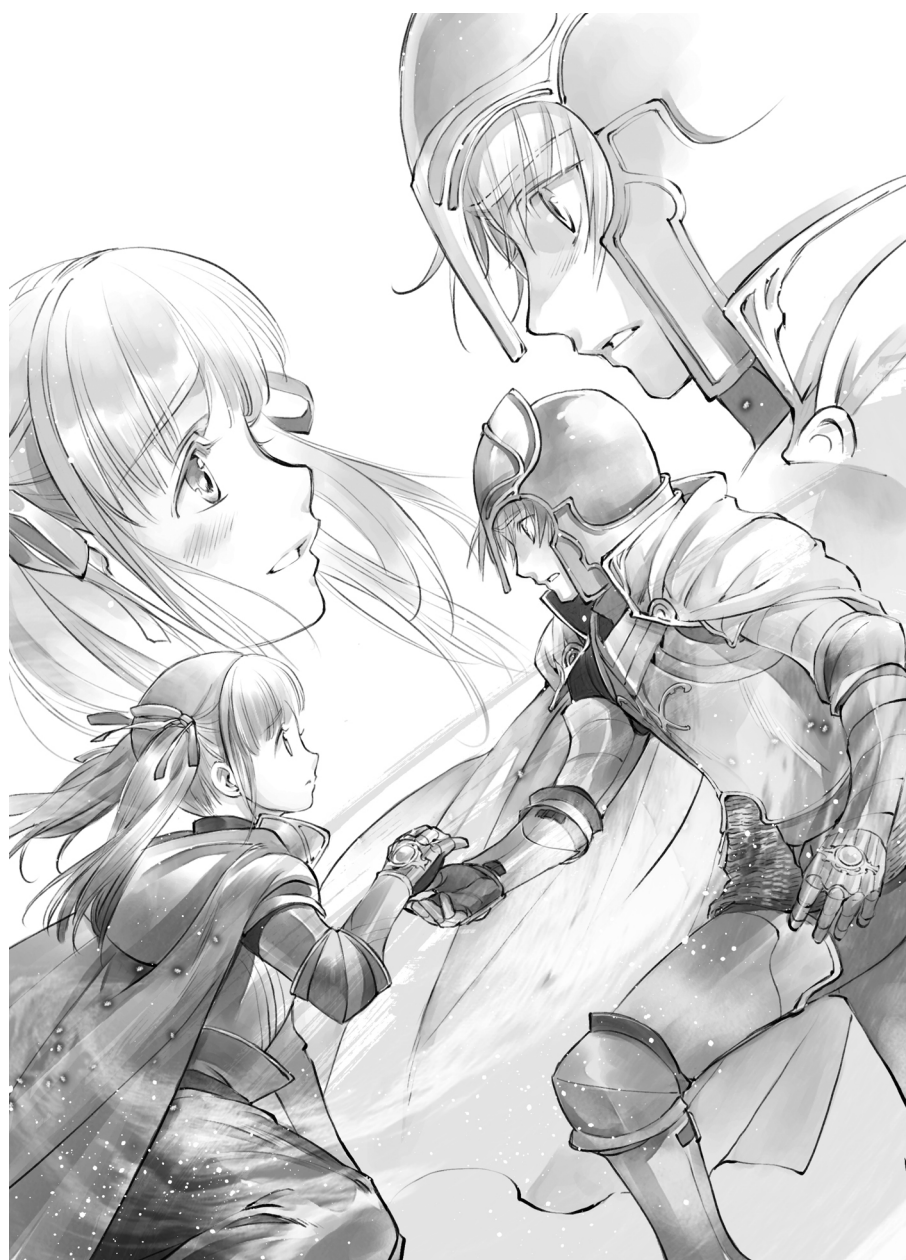
As an archduke candidate raised in the duchy of warfare, Hannelore seldom had people offer to protect her. She was expected to lead her guard knights into battle, charging straight at danger rather than letting it come to her—and whenever her efforts fell short, she was scolded for not being strong enough. All things considered, Hannelore considered herself a bit of a failure.

But here was Wilfried, trying to keep her safe. Such a thing had never happened to her before, and she wasn't being chastised either. Her heart was racing before she realized it, and when she gazed into his straightforward eyes, she felt strangely fuzzy inside.

"Come with me," he said. "It's much safer inside Rozemyne's shield."

Hannelore stood up. She dispelled her shield, willingly left her base, and took the hand being offered to her. The two then exchanged relieved smiles.

"Very well," she said. "I shall go to Ehrenfest."



By deciding to leave her base and go with Wilfried, Hannelore had cost her duchy the game. While attacks rained down from above and Lestilaut led the apprentice knights into battle against the intruders, she had quietly gone to Ehrenfest for safety.

Hannelore didn't regret her choice or her actions, but the thought of everyone being so angry at her made her feet feel so much heavier. She was terrified about what might happen next.

I've made my bed; I must now lie in it.

After encouraging herself as best she could, Hannelore moved to join the others from her duchy. As an archduke candidate, she needed to stand beside Lestilaut and Rauffen in the front row. Her brother glared at her, but he couldn't scold her in front of the royal family. That alone was a silver lining.

Once everyone was in neat rows and kneeling before the royal family, Anastasius demanded an explanation of the *ditter* game. Rauffen and Hirschur answered, which only made the prince furrow his brow; a simple time line of events was hard to understand in isolation.

This was no normal game of ditter, after all.

Gambling one's engagement on a game of *ditter* on the Royal Academy's grounds wasn't normal, nor was underage archduke candidates leading apprentice knights—and the absurdities didn't stop there. Hannelore had gotten wrapped up in things even without Wilfried proposing to her, then members of the Sovereign Knight's Order had determined it necessary to interfere. The whole situation was peculiar.

"Now, what caused this mess in the first place?" Anastasius finally asked, irritated.

"You have my sincerest apologies," Wilfried replied without hesitation.

Anastasius raised an eyebrow slightly, troubled to have received a "sorry" rather than an answer. Hannelore noticed this, then turned back to Wilfried. Ehrenfest looked sick with anxiety about being addressed by the royal family. They were so different from her brother, Lestilaut, who had merely clicked his tongue.

Oh, but wait...

Hannelore remembered seeing Rozemyne in the royal family's villa. Back then, Rozemyne hadn't looked at all shaken about being in the presence of royalty—in fact, she had even displayed the courage to assert her own opinion without faltering. Just watching her had given Hannelore chills, but compared to how the others from Ehrenfest were acting now... For the first time, she understood why her brother had said that Rozemyne was a cut above the others in her

duchy.

That side of Lady Rozemyne certainly reminds me of my brother. Perhaps they are more alike than I originally thought.

Lestilaut may have been kneeling before Anastasius, but he wasn't looking down at the ground; instead, he was looking the prince square in the face, strength in his eyes, showing that he had no intention of backing down.

"I also have a question," Lestilaut said. "Why are *you* here, Prince Anastasius? Should matters of the Royal Academy not fall to Prince Hildebrand?"

In essence, Lestilaut was refusing to answer to anyone but the person in charge. He was right that Anastasius had not received the king's permission to oversee the Royal Academy—in fact, one could argue that he was overstepping the bounds of his authority simply by being here. This was far from Lestilaut doing Hildebrand a favor, however; his true intention was to bring forth the younger royal, who would be easier to manipulate.

No, Brother! This is not what you want!

After interacting with Hildebrand during their tea party and at the underground archive, Hannelore had sensed that the younger prince admired—and perhaps even loved—Rozemyne. Having him arbitrate a game of *ditter* intended to decide his first crush's future husband would only cause problems.

Hannelore frantically shook her head, silently imploring Anastasius to disregard her brother's demand. The prince met her gaze, then gave a curt nod, his arms crossed.

"Hildebrand would find this incident troublesome to deal with," Anastasius said. "The Zent has instructed that I temporarily take his place."

Lestilaut sniffed dismissively, then adopted the broad smile he used when socializing. "In that case, I would also like to know the meaning behind this mess. We went through all the procedures necessary to use these grounds for *ditter*." He glared at one of the restrained knights. "For what folly did the Sovereign Knight's Order interfere with our holy game?"

It was a very impolite way of speaking to a royal—disrespectful, even—but Lestilaut was justified in his anger. The Sovereign Knight's Order had tempted middle and lesser duchies into interfering with a game of *ditter*, all so that Rozemyne would not end up in Dunkelfelger's hands.

"It was the Sovereign Knight's Order that caused problems, not us," Lestilaut continued. "I intend to petition the king for an explanation as to why our game was interrupted, an admission that he failed to keep his knights under control, and a guarantee that these

three rogues will receive the strictest punishment.”

“What?! Lord Lestilaut, what are you saying?!”

This exclamation came not from Anastasius, but from Wilfried. Ehrenfest appeared more shocked than anyone else.

Lestilaut blinked as if confused. “What issue do you have with that? If any other Knight’s Order acted in this manner, their archduke would be reprimanded for mismanaging them. In the case of the Sovereign Knight’s Order, the royal family is responsible.”

“What issue...?” Wilfried repeated. “I... I mean to say, we do not need to treat this so serious—”

“But we do. They defiled a holy game of ditler—one that would have decided the fate of our archduke candidates.”

Now that they prayed to the gods and received blessings before playing ditler, those from Dunkelfelger had started to deify the sport even more than before. Interfering with a game being offered to the gods was equivalent to obstructing a religious ceremony or a dedication whirl.

This is... strange. Do those of Ehrenfest not consider it disrespectful to the gods for a religious ceremony to have been interrupted...?

As far as Hannelore could tell from Rozemyne’s rituals in the Royal Academy, Ehrenfest performed religious ceremonies considerably more often than Dunkelfelger. The duchy was closer to the gods and more accustomed to receiving divine protections and blessings... yet its representatives didn’t seem at all annoyed about the interruption. Even though they respected the gods more than the royal family did, they were being unusually calm.

Lestilaut continued, “Can you explain why none of you seem at all outraged about all this? I seem to recall that your apprentice knights made no effort to help disperse the intruders...”

“We had many wounded; it is only obvious that we would prioritize healing them and evacuating the noncombatants. Rather, I think *you* should explain how you could leave Lady Hannelore in such a dangerous place to—”

“Enough, both of you,” Anastasius said, stepping in before the discussion could become an argument. He then faced down Lestilaut with a piercing stare. “Indeed, these knights acted without an order from the royal family, and we intend to question them as to why. However, Lestilaut, I also have a question for you. As you said, you went through the proper channels for your game of ditler, but I remember your document describing it as the kind played during training. There was no mention of the outcome deciding the engagements of any archduke candidates. Rozemyne’s engagement to Wilfried already has the king’s approval, so it seems to me that you used underhanded means to make this happen. Am I correct?”

When requesting the use of the training grounds, one could get approval simply by writing that it was for *ditter*; there was no need to specify the kind of *ditter* or the reason it was being played. This was news to Hannelore, but Lestilaut had apparently exploited this loophole to achieve something that was otherwise unprecedented.

Lestilaut shook his head. "I thought that you, of all people, would understand my feelings, Prince Anastasius. After all, you employed all manner of schemes to obtain your own *Geduldh*."

Please, no! It's true, but saying that is so impertinent!

Under normal circumstances, by the king's decree, Eglantine's chosen partner should have become the next king. Lestilaut was protesting criticism from the prince who had done everything in his power to overturn that declaration.

Hannelore felt an uncomfortable pang in her stomach. She didn't want to be next to her brother right now.

"I can understand the desire to obtain your *Geduldh*, but trying to decide archduke candidates' fate through *ditter*, of all things, is outright unthinkable. And without even allowing the archdukes to discuss matters first..."

"Oh...? Are you looking down on *ditter*, by chance, Prince Anastasius?" Lestilaut asked, his voice getting sharper.

Two years ago, Rozemyne's schemes had caused a lot of excitement, and these feelings had only continued to build when Dunkelfelger's history was shared a year later. This year, with *A Ditter Story* and the ritual to obtain true blessings, those from Dunkelfelger had come to appreciate and even worship *ditter* more than ever before.

Anastasius was understandably oblivious to these private affairs, but he immediately realized that his words had caused offense to someone with very good reason to criticize the Sovereign Knight's Order. "No, that is far from my intention," he said. "However, if you wish to redo your game that was disrupted by the Sovereign Knight's Order, then I would ask that the aubs of both duchies be allowed to decide the terms themselves."

"A rematch would be more disrespectful to *ditter* and the gods than anything else," Lestilaut replied flatly. "We cannot overturn the results of a game played with divine blessings, nor do I intend to."

"Hold on," Wilfried said. "We could not possibly consider our game valid after what happened..."

"But the results are clear. Hannelore left our base of her own will."

"Yes, to escape danger. I invited her into Schutzaria's shield for her own safety. At first, she refused, and—"

"Silence! The match was decided the moment our treasure left our

base. Dunkelfelger lost. Ehrenfest won. I will not tolerate any further protest.”

After saying his piece, Lestilaut glanced over at Hannelore, his eyes narrowed slightly in what might have been a glare. His expression indicated that he wanted to demand answers from her—to know *why* she had chosen to leave their base—but was desperately suppressing the urge.

Hannelore averted her gaze, trying to escape her brother’s wrath. It wasn’t long before her eyes wandered to Wilfried. He was pale-faced, doubtless overcome with guilt; after all, he had assured Hannelore that they would be repeating the match.

“Prince Anastasius, we do not dispute the results of our ditter game,” Lestilaut said. “However, we of Dunkelfelger request the right to participate in the questioning and sentencing of those three knights. The last thing we would want is for them to receive punishments that do not match the severity of their crime.”

Anastasius grimaced at the implicit accusation that the royal family would do something so heinous. Before he could speak, however, Lestilaut continued.

“Luckily, this ditter match was performed in the Royal Academy. If we put the matter to rest now, then we can avoid having to involve every archduke during the Archduke Conference. The same goes for the pitiable apprentice knights whom the Sovereign Knight’s Order incited.”

Lestilaut was soon to graduate, meaning he was fully capable of participating in the next Archduke Conference and airing the misdeeds of the Sovereign Knight’s Order—misdeeds that had taken place in the Royal Academy, where adults weren’t supposed to interfere. From there, he could put pressure on the archdukes of the middle and lesser duchies that had participated.

If the royal family *had* ordered this unthinkable act, then they certainly wouldn’t want more attention drawn to it. Lestilaut was exploiting this fact... which made Hannelore sigh.

He who lives in a glass house, Brother... You would not want word to spread that you pressured Ehrenfest into a game of ditter, hoping to cancel Lady Rozemyne’s engagement, only to ultimately lose.

Lestilaut was effectively haggling with the royal family while trying to push his own vulnerability out of sight. Hannelore could only dream of being so shamelessly bold.

“I recognize Dunkelfelger’s request,” Anastasius said. “Does Ehrenfest have anything to say?”

“Ah...”

Wilfried exchanged a few words with his retainers, then replied, “No, Ehrenfest will obey the royal family’s decision.” They had

resolved to demonstrate their fealty rather than kick up a fuss.

“I see. Now, with all that has been said, allow me to make one thing clear: if we learn of any further battles for Rozemyne, we of the royal family will settle things permanently by securing her ourselves. We will accept no debate.”

Not just Ehrenfest, but everyone present gasped at this announcement.

Anastasius continued, “Wilfried, you should have thought of a means to avoid this match before you received the challenge in the first place. You are Rozemyne’s fiancé—you could have spoken to the royal family and fought against Dunkelfelger’s demands. By accepting their terms, you have left yourself with no choice but to accept challenges from any other top-ranking duchies targeting Rozemyne. Do you understand this?”

Ehrenfest’s accumulating trends, the Royal Academy’s Dedication Ritual, the joint research projects to be announced during the Interduchy Tournament... With so many accomplishments under her belt, Rozemyne’s perceived value and popularity were rising drastically. The king had approved of her engagement, but this incident with Dunkelfelger had set a troublesome precedent, one that Anastasius believed would entice other duchies to attempt to claim her. In truth, it had already begun—that the Sovereign Knight’s Order had managed to persuade lesser and middle duchies was evidence enough. It wasn’t hard to imagine what would come of all this.

“You have prevailed this time, Wilfried, but you cannot rely on it happening again,” Anastasius warned. “Not all challenges will take place in the form of dinner. Whether or not Rozemyne stays in Ehrenfest will depend entirely on how you act as her fiancé and as the next archduke. Next time, you must do better.”

Wilfried hung his head. As the gathering came to an end, he couldn’t help but feel dejected.

Immediately upon returning to the Dunkelfelger Dormitory, Hannelore was surrounded by Lestilaut and the others.

“Hannelore, why did you willingly leave our base?” Lestilaut asked. “During last year’s Interduchy Tournament, you were praised extensively for having defied dinner’s infamous Lord of Evil. Nobody would believe that you gave up to escape danger. What did you have to gain?”

At once, a vivid image flashed through Hannelore’s mind. She could see Wilfried, his dark-green eyes brimming with worry, his hand so warmly extended. Her brother was right; she had not left their base to flee from danger.

“I want to go to Ehrenfest,” she finally answered.

Had the offer come from anyone else, Hannelore knew she would not have taken their hand. She wanted someone who would fight to protect her, even when there was so much danger to overcome.

“So you exploited Lord Lestilaut’s ditter game for the sake of your own love,” Cordula remarked, expressing her understanding. “Even as your head attendant, I would never have predicted such a move, milady. Your growth is splendid.”

Hannelore turned to her, taken aback. She wanted to dispute the claim, but she couldn’t bring herself to speak. As a result, everyone accepted Cordula’s interpretation as fact.

But, love...? Is that really what I’m feeling?

Hannelore had abandoned her base so that she could take Wilfried’s hand—so that she could go to Ehrenfest—but she didn’t feel that she could puff out her chest and declare she was in love. Her feelings were something more vague that she couldn’t quite express. As she mulled it over, the surrounding apprentice knights began reflecting on the game of ditter.

“I didn’t know that Lady Hannelore wanted to marry into Ehrenfest.”

“If we’d had even a suspicion, I wouldn’t have left her alone in our base...”

“We lost this time due to Lord Lestilaut’s negligence and poor information gathering.”

Nobody attacked Hannelore for her actions; their duchy had tasted defeat, but as far as anyone was concerned, she had achieved a personal victory and obtained the future she desired. Plus, this outcome would still secure them a connection with Ehrenfest. Lestilaut was displeased about having lost, but for Hannelore and the duchy as a whole, the game had still proven beneficial.

“Why did you not tell us sooner?” Lestilaut asked. “Were you colluding with Rozemyne? And when did you even begin to have feelings for Wilfried?”

Hannelore couldn’t have told them before the game; her heart had only changed when she saw Wilfried offering her his hand. She had ended up hiding important information from the others in her duchy, but she had done so entirely by accident. Lestilaut himself, on the other hand, had done the same deliberately. That was more problematic, in Hannelore’s opinion.

“Well, I did not know you wished to acquire Lady Rozemyne until you began taunting Lord Wilfried at our tea party, Brother. Not to mention, you are the one who made me resolve to marry into Ehrenfest.”

Lestilaut fell silent. Rozemyne had suggested that Hannelore marry Wilfried as his second wife if Dunkelfelger lost, but only

because she had wanted to avoid playing ditler entirely. Lestilaut had ignored that and accepted the condition—and when Hannelore had tried pleading with him to reconsider, he had demanded that she be silent.

“Perhaps, but I did not think you *wanted* to marry into Ehrenfest,” Lestilaut groaned. “It is one thing to obtain a groom, but Ehrenfest places far too low in the rankings for a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate.”

One of his retainers patted him on the back. “Unfortunately, the results are what they are.”

“Yes, I know. This is my fault for not thinking that my little sister might surpass me. This is the result that she wanted.”

He sighed, but he made no attempt to overturn the results of their ditler game. His incessant grumbling was ultimately because he knew he would need to send a report home detailing everything that had transpired. His parents would surely chastise him for being soft on his family and not gathering intelligence properly.

Hannelore looked at her hand, and only then did she realize she had unwittingly extended her arm. She could remember Wilfried reaching out to her, and as she thought about the moment when their hands had met, a pleasant warmth spread through her chest.

There was such a broad, gentle smile on Hannelore’s face that everyone around her took in a sharp breath.

The Saint's Ritual

“Lueuradi, is everything ready?”

Today, I was going to participate in the ritual that Ehrenfest was performing as part of their joint research. I consulted my board of instructions for the umpteenth time; it had been given to me by Lady Muriella of Ehrenfest, with whom I often discussed *Royal Academy Love Stories*.

“Yes, Big Sister. I have cleansed myself, as instructed, and prepared the necessary rejuvenation potions. I was also able to memorize the prayer.”

“The prayer is almost the same as the one spoken during the third-year divine protections ritual, is it not?” my older sister asked. “Have you not had yours yet, Lueuradi? Don’t tell me you’ve yet to learn the names of the gods. Ehrenfest’s laynobles passed on their first day, so if a Jossbrenner apprentice archscholar hasn’t managed even that much...”

She looked exasperated but memorizing the names of all the gods was no easy feat. I also wasn’t keen on her comparing me to the students of Ehrenfest; their third-years had passed every single one of their written lessons on the first day since joining the Academy. Lady Rozemyne, the archduke candidate leading them, was blazing through her practical lessons on top of that, so using her as the benchmark really didn’t seem fair.

“You are slow to finish your classes, and you cannot even gather proper intelligence...” my sister concluded.

“Oh, but Sister—you failed to gather intelligence on Lady Rozemyne as well, did you not?” I retorted, looking up with a pout. There was no reason for me to tolerate her brassy remarks when her own efforts had produced no meaningful results.

Back when Lady Rozemyne was a first-year, my sister had attempted to gather information about her—only to find that Lady Rozemyne’s retainer, Hartmut, had exercised complete control over what was accessible. The most one could obtain was lengthy, boastful speeches that amounted to little more than “She is the Saint of Ehrenfest, after all.” My sister had tried again during her second year, only to be shooed away by Lady Clarissa of Dunkelfelger, who had asserted that *she* was Hartmut’s escort.

I continued, “Though *your* attempts all ended in failure, Sister, I

was able to find out Lady Rozemyne's favorite stories and discover her plans for returning to her duchy. Lord Hartmut and Lady Philine told me all. I also learned from a conversation between Lord Wilfried and Lady Hannelore that she is forming bonds with top-ranking duchies by lending them books. And now, I am rather close friends with Lady Muriella."

Since her first year at the Royal Academy, Lady Rozemyne had been buying stories from other duchies at a high price. One of our own laynobles had wanted to ask what her favorite stories were, hoping to secure as much money as possible—but as the person in charge of acquiring the stories was an archnoble, they had asked me to accompany them. That had marked the beginning of my visits to the library, and from there, I was able to gain information from Lord Hartmut and Lady Philine.

It seems that Lady Rozemyne prefers love stories. They are said to be "cash cows," though I cannot say I am familiar with the term.

I could tell that Lady Rozemyne and I would become fast friends, were we ever to meet. I, too, had a particular fondness for love stories. I was already getting along well with Lady Muriella, a new retainer of Lady Rozemyne's whom Lady Philine had introduced me to. She was especially passionate about love stories, and that was often where our conversations headed. Gathering information quickly fell by the wayside.

I need to befriend Lady Rozemyne as well so that I might read Ehrenfest's love stories sooner than anyone else.

As much as I enjoyed asking Lady Muriella about what stories awaited me in the next volume, as expected, I much preferred the thought of reading them myself. This year, I was lucky enough to be borrowing a volume from Lady Charlotte—and quite early on, might I add—but it wasn't the newest volume, and I couldn't borrow it whenever I wanted.

Lady Muriella says the new volume has a wondrous scene where the God of Darkness spreads his sleeve at the gazebo where the Goddess of Time plays tricks, shielding the Goddess of Light. Aah, when will I be able to read it?

"Would you please stop sighing about how you wish to wed into Ehrenfest to read new books?" my sister said. "Accept reality. Ehrenfest has so many honor students and so much attention being drawn to it these days that securing a husband from there won't be easy. Things are not as they were years ago."

"Perhaps I would have a better chance marrying an Ehrenfest mednoble?"

"Mother and Father only know Ehrenfest from when it was at the bottom of the rankings; they would never permit you to marry a

mednoble from there. Again, stop being so wishy-washy. It is time to go to the auditorium.”

Fairziere called over Lustlaune, another apprentice archscholar. Lustlaune, my big sister, and I were the only students from Jossbrenner due to participate in this joint research.

Though reaching this day was by no means easy.

My eyes grew distant as I reflected on everything that had occurred.

Ehrenfest was a middle duchy that had drifted around the bottom of the rankings for as long as anyone could remember, only to abruptly shoot up after getting through the civil war. Compared to other duchies, its harvest was steady and growing by the year, proof enough that its lands were readily supplied with mana. Its position at the Royal Academy had also risen steadily over the past five or six years. Initially, only its first-years had obtained better grades—most noticeably in their written lessons—and the other duchies had mocked them for setting standards they wouldn’t be able to maintain.

Of course, this had all taken place before I joined the Academy, back when Jossbrenner still ranked above Ehrenfest.

Despite the constant gibes from other duchies, some of Ehrenfest’s students had started to perform better in practical lessons as well, even boasting larger mana capacities than was expected for a middle duchy. It wasn’t long before half of their student population was earning favorable grades, and rumors quickly spread that they were using some new, highly effective mana compression method.

Lady Rozemyne’s attendance at the Royal Academy drew even more attention to Ehrenfest, especially when every single Ehrenfest student in her year passed their written lessons on the first day. She also brought with her a number of new trends, which was interesting in itself. It wasn’t always the case that new goods introduced by middle or lesser duchies became fashionable; without the assistance and publicity of greater duchies, most fizzled out as mere curiosities.

Some time later, before socializing season, Lady Rozemyne took ill and returned to Ehrenfest. She became the subject of mockery at many middle- and lesser-duchy tea parties, during which participants would don sarcastic smiles and say that it would be “oh so nice” for her if the greater duchies picked up her trends.

And then came Ehrenfest’s own tea party, held at the end of the year and open to all other duchies. On this memorable occasion, it was revealed that Lady Rozemyne had connections to top-ranking duchies *and* the royal family. Prince Anastasius purchased an Ehrenfest hairpin, and Lady Eglantine personally received a jar of the product that makes one’s hair glossy.

Oh, how the middle and lesser duchies were taken aback. Oh, how they panicked.

I do not know the details firsthand—it was my sister who attended as Jossbrenner’s representative—but it was apparently quite the experience. Most notable of all was when Lady Rozemyne collapsed partway through.

They had scrambled to gather information about Lady Rozemyne, conscious that the Interduchy Tournament was right around the corner, only to find themselves unable to speak with any Ehrenfest students. The most optimistic among them believed that they might have a chance during the tournament itself, but Lady Rozemyne did not attend due to poor health. On top of that, Ehrenfest’s previously barren socializing spot was suddenly teeming with the archdukes of greater duchies, meaning that those of middle and lesser duchies were unable to properly approach.

In her second year, Lady Rozemyne once again blazed through her classes before vanishing. Lady Charlotte took over Ehrenfest’s socializing season in her absence.

Even during that year’s Interduchy Tournament, Lady Rozemyne was inaccessible to the masses. She and Lord Ferdinand were busy handling Dunkelfelger, so Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte hosted the middle and lesser duchies instead. Lady Rozemyne then ended up leaving the awards ceremony following the attack and did not attend the coming-of-age ceremony the next day.

Despite standing out so much due to looking like a seven-year-old, Lady Rozemyne was seldom seen around the Royal Academy.

This year, however, she was finally staying at the Royal Academy for socializing season. It was our first opportunity to speak with her. She gave soft, entertained smiles during discussions about books, and faltered with embarrassment when asked about the real-life love story that she was experiencing... but when it came to the negative rumors about Aub Ehrenfest, she always gave sad looks.

According to the stories exchanged during the Archduke Conference, Aub Ehrenfest was much harsher on his adopted daughter than on his blood children. Lady Rozemyne had apparently spent such a long time locked away in the temple that she could only stay at the Royal Academy for brief stints. It must have been very hard on her.

Lady Rozemyne denied the rumors, but everyone knew that she had returned to Ehrenfest while her siblings, the archduke’s blood children, had gotten to participate in socializing season. If they were truly seen as equals, then all three of them would have been made to leave.

“So, Lady Rozemyne. Forget about the temple; I wish to discuss your joint research. What manner of research are you doing with the greater duchies?” asked Lady Murrenreue, an archduke candidate

from Immerdink. She had interrupted Lady Rozemyne's conversation about temple rituals to very uncouthly ask to join her research with Dunkelfelger.

During last year's Interduchy Tournament, an Immerdink archnoble had accidentally attacked Lady Rozemyne—a blunder for which they had been thoroughly chastised. Lady Murrenreue had mentioned during a previous tea party that “nobody acknowledged all the suffering Lady Rozemyne put Immerdink through,” so this was an especially shameless heel turn.

Lady Rozemyne was not to blame for the many casualties Immerdink had suffered during the *ternisbefallen* attack nor for their lower position in the duchy rankings after their archnoble was scolded. But as others moved to stop Lady Murrenreue, Lady Rozemyne, who had fallen into thought, suddenly looked up and smiled.

“As part of our joint research, Ehrenfest will be demonstrating a religious ceremony. Would you care to join? If we can obtain permission from Dunkelfelger, that is.”

“Oh my. You would allow me to?”

You are being too agreeable, Lady Rozemyne.

I was exasperated, but the representatives of other duchies flocked to join as well. Immerdink's participation had opened a floodgate of sorts, with everyone now convinced that they should also get to take part.

Naturally, I made sure to get involved too.

“Sister, we may be able to participate in Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger's joint research!”

“Well done, Lueuradi.”

Jossbrenner wasted no time before reaching out to Dunkelfelger, though we received a most unusual response: “Play us in *ditter*, then!” I was unsure what the sport had to do with their joint research project, but it was apparently essential.

I didn't have the authority to answer a *ditter* challenge from another duchy on my own, so we consulted our aub. We were told to accept—our priority was securing ourselves a position in Ehrenfest's religious ceremony.

And so, we sent our apprentice knights to take on Dunkelfelger.

“Lady Lueuradi, it seems that Dunkelfelger wanted to play treasure-stealing *ditter* specifically.”

“That old variant?”

Treasure-stealing *ditter* was so old-fashioned that it had come up only briefly during class; we had never even attempted it during our practical lessons. We ended up facing Dunkelfelger alongside other

middle and lesser duchies, but we still suffered defeat.

Now, our duchy's students were so exhausted that we needed rejuvenation potions en masse. This wasn't something we had accounted for—speed ditter never required so much mana—so it was quite a serious error on our part.

“Our gathering spot is rather sparse at present, and not many good ingredients can be found there...” I mused aloud. We had painfully little to work with, and we would need to invest a lot of our mana to brew the very potions intended to restore it. The apprentice scholars would all make them together, but they could not force the apprentice knights to pay them for their efforts.

I decided to petition the aub for his opinion—after all, these unexpected costs had resulted from his order. He covered the necessary expenses for our rejuvenation potions, but that greatly reduced the amount of money we had available for the Interduchy Tournament.

Thanks to the hard work of our duchy's apprentice knights, Dunkelfelger allowed three of us to participate in the joint research, as we had requested. We now needed to deliver permission boards to an Ehrenfest apprentice scholar, who would then tell us the details of our participation.

Thus, I contacted Lady Muriella.

“What?” I said. “We will need rejuvenation potions to participate in the joint research?”

“Indeed,” Lady Muriella replied. “Lady Rozemyne said the ceremony will require mana, so those who do not bring any will surely struggle.”

This revelation left me quite vexed. We had received an order from our aub and gotten our apprentice knights to work so hard for our sake, so we more or less *had* to participate in the ceremony. But at the same time, I wanted to avoid using any more mana outside of classes, or needing more rejuvenation potions.

Perhaps it would have been wise to take after Immerdink and step down the moment ditter became involved.

Immerdink had suffered more casualties during last year's ternisbefallen attack than any other duchy, leaving them with far fewer apprentice knights than was expected from a territory of their size. It was said that they had simply bowed out, unable to participate in the ditter.

“Jossbrenner does not have leeway as Ehrenfest does,” I said. “Is participating in this joint research truly worth depleting our mana even further?”

Lady Muriella looked somewhat confused. “I do not know about

the leeway of other duchies, but I believe it is worth seeing one of Lady Rozemyne's ceremonies. You will come to understand what it means to offer prayers to the gods and to be loved by them in turn." Her green eyes usually sparkled with excitement for love stories, but that emotion was gone, replaced with an uncompromising seriousness.

After taking a sharp breath, I resolved to participate in Ehrenfest's joint research.

Over two hundred people were gathered in the auditorium. The crowd was shockingly large, which made me even more uneasy about the fact that only two other people wore my duchy's cream-colored cape.

I reached out and tugged on my elder sister's cape. "Sister, will this many people be participating in the joint research?"

"Most archduke candidates are here, so I imagine the crowd is largely made up of their retainers. There will not be this many participants in practice."

My understanding of archduke candidates being followed by retainers was spotty at best. My sister had served Jossbrenner's last archduke candidate to graduate, so she had that experience to draw from, but said candidate had gone by the time I entered the Royal Academy, and we had no others here to speak of.

Even when working in the castle, I am rarely involved with archduke candidates.

"Um, Lady Fairziere... is that not the Sovereign Knight's Order?" Lustlaune asked, pointing to the back of the auditorium, at the door leading to the Farthest Hall where we obtained our schtappes. Indeed, for some reason, there were black-cloaked Sovereign knights lined up there. Several among them even appeared to have been in battle not long ago; they had doubtless recovered themselves using rejuvenation potions or something of the sort, but their damaged clothing spoke volumes.

"What happened, I wonder...?"

"You are the one in charge of this little effort, Lueuradi," my sister said, looking tense. "If you do not know the answer, then how would I?"

It was impossible to predict what would happen when Dunkelfelger and Ehrenfest were involved. Thinking about it, gathering this many people in the auditorium for joint research was abnormal to begin with.

Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger students dispersed throughout the crowd, making a loud announcement: "The ritual will take place through the door, in the Farthest Hall. Participants must display their permission form. Those without one will not be allowed in. Please line

up one by one.” I saw Lady Philine and Lady Muriella among them.

Klassenberg the First was the first to enter. As they had no archduke candidates present at the Royal Academy, five of their apprentice archscholars were participating instead. They all stopped right outside the door for some reason, which was unusual to me.

The archduke candidates of Dunkelfelger the Second were also participating in the joint research, so they were inside already. Drewanchel the Third followed after Klassenberg... but then there was a commotion.

“What do you mean I cannot enter?! I am Lord Ortwin’s guard knight!”

“Those without permission forms will not receive entry. Guard knights are no exception.”

The guard knight was now brimming with anger. “Do you really think anyone will—”

“Those without a form will not be allowed inside,” came a voice as those of the Sovereign Knight’s Order stepped forward. “Stand down.” They were unmistakably displeased and staring daggers at the disruptive student.

Lord Ortwin’s guard knight bit his lip, then backed away to rejoin the other knights. I never would have thought that retainers wouldn’t be allowed to follow their lords or ladies into the Farthest Hall.

“What are they thinking, separating guard knights from their charges?” I asked, gripping my own permission form with unease. Before I could ponder the matter further, however, I spotted another student being led away from the entrance, still gripping her form. Given her light-violet cape, she must have been from Ahrensbach.

Apprentice knights from Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger were waving the girl out of the auditorium. “As guard knights cannot attend the ritual, we cannot allow those who may pose a threat to go inside,” one said.

“This isn’t right!” the girl cried. “I’m not malicious in the slightest! It’s Lady Rozemyne! This is all a plot by Lady Rozemyne!”

“You will receive a chance to state your case.”

The Sovereign Knight’s Order took the girl from the apprentice knights, and she left the room with a stiff expression.

“Wh-What happened there?” I asked.

Lustlaune quietly shook her head. “I do not know. However, if I were to extrapolate from her statements, I would assume they have something that can detect dangerous individuals.”

“They need to ensure the students are safe without their guard knights,” my sister whispered, “and I suppose the best approach is to remove all those with malicious intentions. None from Klassenberg or Drewanchel have been refused entry.” Her eyes wandered to a nearby

group of lesser-duchy students; some of them spread many negative rumors about Ehrenfest during tea parties and wore their envy on their sleeves.

I complained about needing so many rejuvenation potions, but... that won't be considered malice, will it?!

My heart pounded in my chest as I awaited my turn. Each participant was stopped at the entrance, as we had already seen, but only two of the five Ahrensbach apprentice scholars were turned away.

"I wonder what is on the other side of that door," I said. "Everyone stops before passing through." The door was open, but a complexly colored sheet of mana obscured whatever was beyond it.

Soon enough, it was my sister's turn to enter. She stopped in place, like all those before her had done, and then she was gone.

"Next," Lady Philine called.

I advanced, clutching my permission form to my chest. The Sovereign knights stationed on either side of the door were exceedingly terrifying, but I took care to keep my eyes forward; this was no time to be gazing down at my feet.

I passed through the film, saw the inside of the Farthest Hall, and stopped as everyone else had.

What's going on?! Nobody told me so many members of the royal family were going to be here!

My first sight upon entering was the royal family lined up within a yellow, translucent dome. In front of them was Lady Rozemyne, wearing her High Bishop robes.

I froze in place, so stunned that I thought my heart might stop. Only when someone beside me asked for my permission form was I pulled from my stupor. I passed the board to Lady Clarissa of Dunkelfelger, still somewhat dazed.

"This is Schutzaria's shield," Lady Rozemyne explained. "It denies entry to all those with malicious intent. As guard knights cannot attend the ritual, we are having to filter the students like so. Please go inside and greet everyone."

She then stepped to the side, revealing Lady Eglantine, Prince Anastasius, Lady Adolphine, Prince Sigiswald, Lady Nahelache, and King Trauerqual himself. Never in my wildest dreams had it occurred to me that I, an archnoble from a middle duchy, would one day interact with the royal family.

King Trauerqual did not have a Grutrissheit, so the duchies on the losing side of the civil war often accused him of being unfit to rule. Still, his royal presence could not be denied.

I resisted the shaking of my legs and slowly knelt before the king. "I am Lueuradi of Jossbrenner. May I pray for a blessing in

appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?”

“You may.”

His voice was kinder than I’d expected. Feeling a bit relieved, I gave the blessing and then my greeting: “I am honored from the bottom of my heart to have this opportunity to meet you, Zent Trauerqual.”

“You have my thanks for your assistance on this day, Lueuradi.”

Never had I expected the king to speak my name and express to me his gratitude. It was far too great of an honor for an archnoble to receive; had Lady Rozemyne not been there to urge me to my feet, I actually might have cried.

“Lady Lueuradi, Hartmut will guide you from here.”

I stood up at Lady Rozemyne’s prompting and saw Lord Hartmut, clad in the robes of a blue priest. His attire made no sense; he was a noble who had graduated from the Royal Academy. I had just managed to adjust to my shock of seeing the royal family, but now I was starting to feel dizzy all over again.

“Lord Hartmut...” I said. “That outfit...”

“I am Ehrenfest’s High Priest—one who serves Lady Rozemyne, our High Bishop. Furthermore, I am not the only one wearing robes; Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte are as well. Today is a special occasion. Under normal circumstances, only priests and shrine maidens dressed in blue robes may witness Lady Rozemyne’s Dedication Ritual.”

Most others would mock Lord Hartmut’s temple robes, but he was looking down at them proudly. His expression was exactly as I remembered it from last year—the same smile that he wore when extolling Lady Rozemyne’s virtues. I could imagine him gleefully visiting the temple, but that was unthinkable for most nobles.

I shook my head to dispel the images.

“Wait here, if you would,” Lord Hartmut said, having led me to where my elder sister was standing atop a red carpet. The top-ranking duchies were closest to the center, where there was a circular space, with the lowest-ranking duchies being farthest away. It wasn’t a complete circle, and the vacant area was presumably where the royal family would stand once everyone had greeted them.

“It appears that Ehrenfest’s archduke candidates really do all go to the temple...” my sister whispered after Lord Hartmut went to fetch Lustlaune, who had entered after me.

Looking around the room revealed that, as Lord Hartmut had suggested, Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte were both dressed in blue robes. The clothes weren’t being borrowed for the sake of appearances either; the fit was perfect, even for two archduke candidates who were

still growing, and this didn't look like their first time being worn.

I nodded in response to my sister and replied in an equally low voice, "Putting aside the rumors that Aub Ehrenfest treats his blood children better, there is no mistaking that they all perform religious ceremonies."

All of a sudden, a stiff breeze swept through the room. I turned to see that someone had been repelled by the shield protecting the royal family and was now being carried away by Ehrenfest's and Dunkelfelger's apprentice knights.

"I hold no malice!" the rejected student declared.

"Perhaps your venom is directed at me rather than the royal family," Lady Rozemyne said. "Either way, I must ask that you sit this one out. We cannot afford to have those who may be a threat in a ceremonial hall without guard knights."

So, Lustlaune and my sister had assumed correctly—those who were refused entry held malice toward either Lady Rozemyne or the royal family. But how could anyone prove such emotions? How could they reject participants with such confidence?

"Is this truly okay?" I asked. "What if these suspicions of malice turn out to be false? Those who were outed will have been wrongly accused in front of the royal family."

"So you say, but they were clearly knocked back by the shield," Lustlaune said. "Among the top-ranking duchies, only two from Ahrensbach were refused entry, and they were both clearly hostile to Lady Rozemyne. This person was from a losing duchy. I expect this will not be the last rejection we see today."

And she was right. Many others who were subsequently knocked away by the shield were from duchies that had fallen down the ranks after the civil war or spent tea parties complaining about their lands being ravaged. I assumed they were antagonistic to the royal family.

Though hopefully they do not resent Lady Rozemyne for revealing those negative feelings.

After several more students were refused, the lengthy entrance procedure finally concluded. Ehrenfest's and Dunkelfelger's apprentice knights left the room, leaving the two Dunkelfelger archduke candidates at the entrance. The apprentice scholars then closed the door and stood among us.

"Please move to the center," Lady Rozemyne said.

One by one, those of the royal family moved to the center of the carpet. Lady Rozemyne waited for them to take their positions, then dispelled Schutzaria's shield.

"The ritual will now begin," Lord Wilfried announced. He explained the process, and only then was I made aware that the purpose of the ritual was to collect mana from everyone as an offering

to the royal family.

In what way is this ritual a part of any joint research?! Every duchy is going through a mana shortage, and this is what they ask of us? Were we all tricked?!

It seemed that I wasn't the only person feeling this way. Everyone started exchanging looks with those around them—that is, until Lady Charlotte offered an explanation.

“This joint research began due to students from both Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger receiving many divine protections from the gods. Through a common thread between our duchies—our regular performance of ceremonies that offer prayers to the gods—we have established the theory that prayer and rituals are essential to obtaining divine protections.”

At that, all those who had wished to complain closed their mouths. Everyone had known about Ehrenfest's third-years obtaining multiple divine protections, but not that it had any relation to ceremonies. In practice, one laynoble had received the protection of an element she did not have an aptitude for, and one mednoble had ended up omni-elemental.

“My elder brother and sister respectively obtained twelve and twenty-one divine protections due to performing religious ceremonies in Ehrenfest's temple,” Lady Charlotte continued.

“This is just how it feels to me, but I can now brew using only seventy percent as much mana as before,” Lord Wilfried added. “I sincerely believe that this research will prove essential in our mana-starved world.”

And that was coming from someone who had actually received twelve divine protections. As he had implied, needing less mana to brew was effectively the same as increasing one's capacity.

Lord Lestilaut of Dunkelfelger, who was still standing by the wall, spoke next. “Many of you saw our duchy perform a ritual and obtain blessings before the games of ditter we required you to play. We have confirmed that said ritual greatly increases one's strength and speed. That, too, has been a result of this research.”

In other words, Dunkelfelger's frightening strength during our games of ditter was in part due to the blessings from the gods they had received from their ritual. I couldn't help but blink in surprise.

Lord Hartmut leisurely made his way to the center of the room, holding something that looked a lot like a bell. “The first Zent of Yurgenschmidt was a High Bishop,” he began in a clear, resounding voice. “During that era, it was normal—expected, even—for Zents and aubs to offer prayers to the gods. It is Lady Rozemyne's wish that, by participating in this ritual, you will all feel the power of the gods more closely and come to rethink your opinions of the temple. She also

hopes that at least some of you will obtain more divine protections.”

Instinctively my eyes flitted about the room, searching for Lady Rozemyne. She was standing quietly by the door, having dispelled Schutzaria’s shield. Her desire to share the knowledge she had obtained with us all so that we could acquire more divine protections was beautiful to behold, especially when she would have gained so much by monopolizing it. I now had a better understanding of why Lord Hartmut was so insistent on calling her the Saint of Ehrenfest.

“The Dedication Ritual shall now begin,” Hartmut announced. “Please kneel where you are and place your hands on the red carpet. Then, you will need to repeat the prayer stated by Lady Rozemyne, the High Bishop of Ehrenfest.”

Those who had been sitting nonchalantly now knelt and pressed their hands against the carpeted floor. The royal family did the same, as did Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte after moving from the center of the circle to the edge.

Soon enough, the only people standing were the Dunkelfelger archduke candidates, Lady Rozemyne by the door, and Lord Hartmut at the center of the room. Then, there was the sudden, loud clanging of a bell.

“The High Bishop shall now enter!” Lord Hartmut declared.

On cue, Lady Rozemyne started toward the shrine, her every step exuding majesty. From where I was positioned, I could see her head-on. Her white robes made her stand out from the sea of colored capes and swiftly brought the word “tranquility” to mind. I could see that her eyes were set on the shrine; nothing else had her attention.

In contrast to her white robes, Lady Rozemyne’s dark hair looked more striking than ever. It was the perfect backdrop for her hairpin, decorated with such magnificent rainbow feystones, which sparkled like the brightest stars. Never before had I seen such a wonderful ornament. It really spoke to how much she was loved by her fiancé.

Oh, fortune... Bless me with a man who will gift me such marvelous feystones.

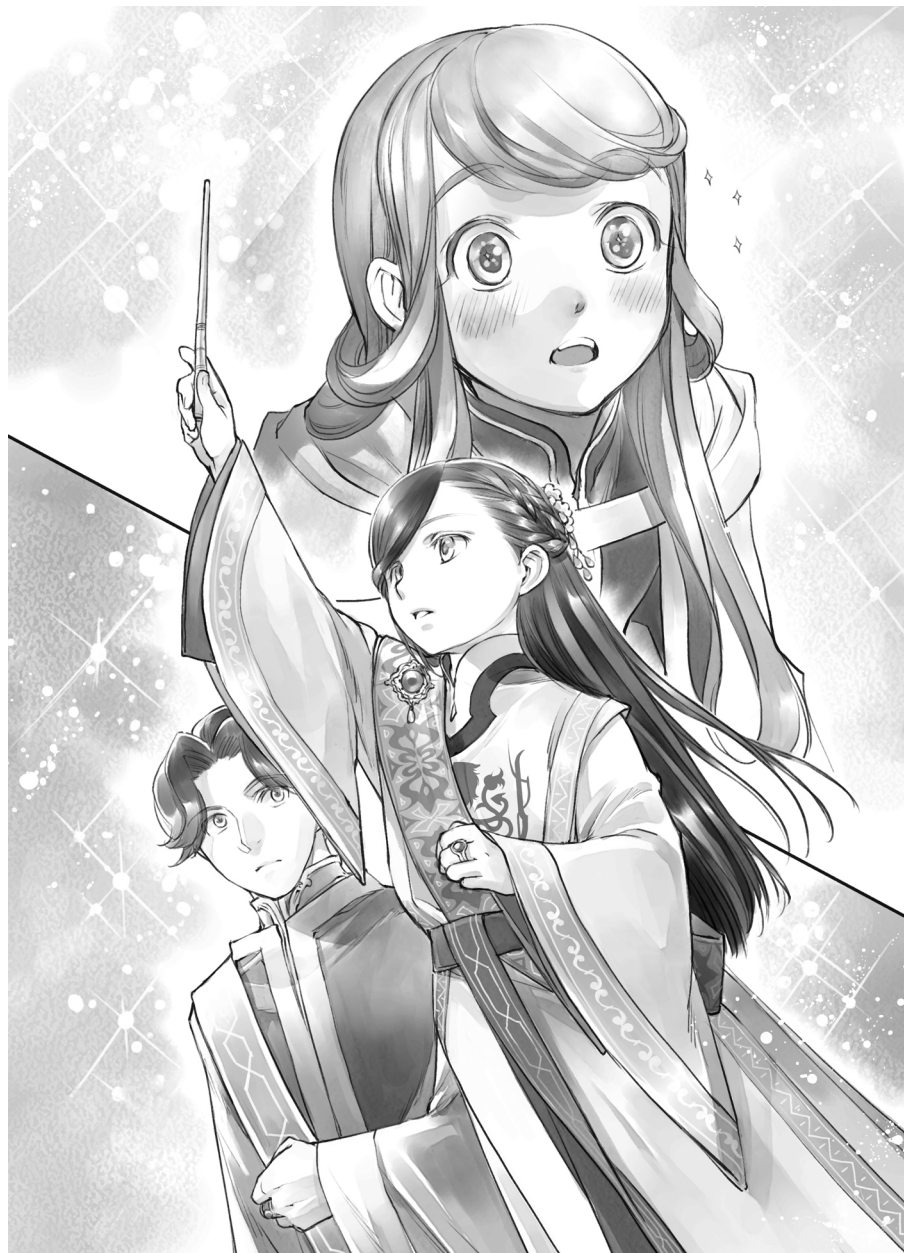
My sister often told me to keep my head out of the clouds and focus on the real world, but I was grounded enough already. I didn’t doubt that I would one day need to marry whomever my parents chose for me, but that was precisely *why* I wanted to dream now, while I was still able.

Though the only person who can empathize with my feelings is Lady Muriella.

As I thought back to our enjoyable discussions about love stories, Lady Rozemyne reached the empty space at the center of the room. There, while looking up at the shrine behind me, she raised both hands in prayer to the gods.

It was said that raising both hands and one's left leg while praying was the best way to get close to the mighty supreme gods of the endless skies, and that placing one's hands on the ground when offering gratitude was a way of approaching the Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm. Simply hearing about these forms of prayer had not been enough for me to truly understand them, but now, seeing Lady Rozemyne assume their posture, it was all slowly falling into place.

"Erdegral," Lady Rozemyne chanted, her voice young and gentle, holding her schtappe aloft in her right hand while gazing intently at the shrine. At once, her schtappe transformed into a sizable chalice that was identical to the one Geduldh held on the shrine, even down to the complex engravings.



Everyone inhaled at once, then there came a single whisper: “Geduldh’s chalice...” In the extreme quiet of the room, even those small words reached every ear.

As I was in Lady Rozemyne’s grade and practical classes, I knew that her upbringing in the temple had equipped her to make the divine weapons and equipment. But I’d never expected her to be able to create the divine chalice on top of that.

A chalice is neither a weapon nor a piece of armor... Where in the world did she learn the spell to morph her schtappe like that? Can it be learned in the temple?

As I was staring in wonderment, my elder sister took a sharp breath. I’d already seen Lady Rozemyne produce a circular shield and give blessings while playing the harspiel in class, so perhaps I was more prepared for this than others.

My sister always rolled her eyes at my reports and called them exaggerated, but surely she understands now. I was telling the truth all along.

Hartmut assisted Lady Rozemyne in setting the large chalice on the floor; it was far too big for her to carry on her own. Then, they both knelt. Lady Rozemyne disappeared from my view, but I could hear her voice as she began a songlike prayer.

“I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world.”

I recalled that we had been told to repeat after her and did just that.

“I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world.”

Our chants were all over the place at first and not at all synchronized; it must have been quite hard on the ears. Everyone finished, and once silence returned, Lady Rozemyne continued.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies.”

“O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm.”

As we all mimicked Lady Rozemyne’s consistent tone and speed, our chanting became increasingly unified. Soon, it felt as though not just our voices but our *feelings* were one. The sense of collaboration really warmed my heart.

“O Goddess of Water Flutrane.”

“O God of Fire Leidenschaft.”

“O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria.”

“O Goddess of Earth Geduldh.”

“O God of Life Ewigeliebe.”

By the time we had spoken the name of the last pillar, our voices were in beautiful unison and carried all the way to the shrine. I could

feel an indescribable sense of unity—and then the world around me began to shimmer. It was like... something was being drawn from our bodies.

“What...?”

An instant later, I started to feel mana being sucked out of me. I did not know what to do; it was my first time having it happen outside of my control. It was draining through my palms, so removing my hands from the carpet would probably stop it, but I could not risk interrupting the ritual.

I made no significant movements, merely watching my hands until the red carpet began to gleam. Our mana was flowing to the chalice as waves of light. I could feel the mana of those behind me sweep past as it moved to the center of the room, steadily accelerating—and as the mana moved faster, it drained from me more quickly.

“We honor you who have blessed all beings with life, and pray that we may be blessed further with your divine might,” concluded the prayer, and with those words, everything became bright. I gazed up to see where the light had come from and saw that the chalice was the source.

“What?! It’s shining?!”

No sooner had people started crying out in surprise than a pillar of light shot up from the chalice and pierced through the ceiling. It was red, the divine color of Geduldh, and reminiscent of a warm hearth.

“Wh-What is the meaning of this?!” the king exclaimed, putting what we were all thinking into words.

“I expect that a portion of our mana flew to some unknown point in the Royal Academy,” Lady Rozemyne replied in a calm voice. “This always happens with rituals done here. It does not happen in Ehrenfest, so I expect it is something unique to the Academy.”

Lord Lestilaut concurred, saying that the same happened with Dunkelfelger’s rituals. “Our rituals produce mainly blue light, but I see this one was red...” He was still positioned near the wall.

“That would be because the Dedication Ritual is a ceremony for filling chalices with mana,” Lady Rozemyne noted. “This red light is all of our mana being offered to the gods. Is it not beautiful?”

I nodded vigorously. It really was.

This is a true divine color.

In my eyes, the seasonal divine colors had always been something to consider when choosing clothes or decorating rooms and nothing more. The lack of choice they afforded had even frustrated me when trying to decide what to wear for my coming-of-age ceremony. Now, however... This was my first time seeing a divine color look so radiant. Not even red elemental feystones compared to its beauty.

“That should be enough, Sister!” Lady Charlotte suddenly cried out. We all turned to see that she was standing.

Lady Rozemyne soon stood up as well, whereupon she announced, “The ceremony has concluded. Everyone, please remove your hands from the floor. I expect some are beginning to run low on mana.”

I did as instructed, and the feeling of unity disappeared all at once. It was like waking up from a dream. At the same time, I was struck by an intense wave of exhaustion, and it became worryingly clear that I was short on mana. My body felt heavier, and I was too dizzy to move; it took all of my willpower just to remain kneeling. I even heard several people behind me collapse.

“Everyone, thank you for participating in the Dedication Ritual,” Lady Rozemyne said. “Those of the royal family and the archduke candidates here today are used to supplying mana to foundational magics, but this must have been especially hard on the archnobles. We have prepared rejuvenation potions to reward those of you who have given us your valuable mana. Hartmut, the potions.”

Lord Hartmut gave a brisk nod and then got to work. Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte did the same, moving without hesitation; it seemed that none of them were particularly tired. The royal family and archduke candidates were all similarly stable, but several archnobles were in a state where they could not even kneel properly.

To think that the royal family and archduke candidates perform such a draining ceremony on a regular basis. I never knew.

I was familiar with the fact that each duchy’s archducal family needed to supply their foundational magic with mana, but I hadn’t known what that entailed—or how draining it was to use so much mana at once.

“These potions should recover your mana more effectively than the ones used in lessons. Of course, those who are wary of poison are not obligated to accept them; you may use one of your own rejuvenation potions instead.”

Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte each took and then drank a potion, indicating that they were safe to consume. Lord Hartmut then extended the box in which the potions were stored to Lady Rozemyne, who similarly drank one before returning the now empty vessel.

“These rejuvenation potions were taught to us by another and are not something we wish to make public,” Lady Rozemyne explained with a mischievous smile. “As such, I must ask that you drink them here and not save them for later; otherwise, I may be scolded for distributing them. We will be retrieving the bottles soon.”

I was enthralled with the idea of a rejuvenation potion more effective than those we were taught to brew in the Royal Academy, but when I looked at my sister, I noticed she was wearing a hard

expression. “Um, Sister? Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Do they truly expect us to drink these strange concoctions when we know not what they contain? This may be a trap of some kind.”

It was a very astute point—one that hadn’t even crossed my mind. As the retainer of an archduke candidate, she was so much more alert than I. Perhaps that was why she always called me “wishy-washy” and the like. I hung my head a little, ashamed.

The box in his arms, Lord Hartmut started asking who wanted one of Ehrenfest’s rejuvenation potions, starting with the king at the very center of the circle. I assumed this was a formality more than anything else; the very idea of a member of the royal family accepting a potion from another duchy without any attendants or guard knights present was unthinkable, but so was distributing them to others without first offering one to the king. Lord Hartmut was no doubt expecting a refusal.

And yet, the king said that he would indeed take one. Seeing his outstretched hand sent a stir through the crowd. The royal family was constantly on guard against ambushes and assassination attempts, and, unlike the lower-ranked duchies agonizing over the mana shortage, the Sovereignty had an abundance of resources. The king had no real need to accept the potion—which meant that this was purely a show of trust.

I cannot believe that Zent Trauerqual places so much faith in Ehrenfest.

We were surprised—and it seemed that those from Ehrenfest were as well. Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte were both staring at the king in shock.

Lady Rozemyne, however, seemed entirely unmoved. “Zent Trauerqual,” she said, “these potions recover mana in bounds, but they have very little impact on one’s stamina. I expect any feelings of tiredness to remain.”

Lord Hartmut nodded in agreement, then added with a serious expression that Lady Rozemyne’s own potions alleviated exhaustion as well. It seemed to me that they were the only ones acting as their usual selves here.

Perhaps following the king’s example, the other members of the royal family accepted potions too. I couldn’t say for certain, but it seemed to me that Prince Sigiswald hesitated briefly before drinking his.

Klassenberg’s apprentice scholars were glaring at the box of potions; now that the royal family had accepted the offer, they were socially obligated to do the same. Still, if the apprentice scholars truly were suspicious, then they were within their rights to refuse.

“Many of you here today used a great number of rejuvenation

potions to play the ditter needed to participate in this ritual, no?” Lady Rozemyne said. “And yet, we have taken even more mana from you in the process of our ceremony. To make up for that, we have prepared these potions. If you are wary of poison then you may drink your own, but please decide quickly.” She looked past the Klassenberg archnobles to the students still wobbling on their knees at the far edge of the circle. “I especially wish for these potions to reach the archnobles of middle and lesser duchies, who are understandably struggling the most.”

To think she would worry more about the bottom-ranking duchies than the top-ranking ones...

Upon seeing the concern in Lady Rozemyne’s eyes, Klassenberg’s archnobles buckled under the pressure and accepted the potions they were offered. From there, the distribution process continued a lot more smoothly. Dunkelfelger’s apprentice scholars took some of the potions and chugged them without delay.

“Allow me to help, Lady Rozemyne.”

Lady Clarissa, looking thrilled to finally be able to move, reached for the box to return her empty potion bottle. She then collected the empty bottles of the others who had finished drinking.

Next, Lord Hartmut distributed potions to Drewanchel, Gilessenmeyer, and Hauchletzte.

“Ehrenfest, these rejuvenation potions seem to recover mana at an extraordinarily fast pace, would you not agree?” Prince Anastasius remarked, his tone questioning. Those who had yet to drink theirs immediately looked to Lady Rozemyne for an answer.

“Our apprentice knights said the same.”

“I thought you prepared them yourself,” the prince said. This time, his voice was sharp—enough so that I started to tremble, even though he wasn’t speaking to me. But Lady Rozemyne just gave a troubled smile.

“I tend to drink another kind of rejuvenation potion, so I am not too familiar with this kind. My siblings and our retainers discussed which potion recipes I could use and decided that these were optimal for the ritual, so they are what I made.”

Does that mean Lady Rozemyne can brew several kinds of rejuvenation potion despite being an archduke candidate?! I already knew from our classes together that she was skilled at brewing, but never had I thought her capable of such a truly impressive feat.

“Lord Ortwin,” Lord Wilfried suddenly interjected, causing the Drewanchel archduke candidate to flinch. “These potions have been distributed for you to recover the mana spent during the ceremony, not to be used for research.”

It seemed that Lord Ortwin had attempted to smuggle one of the

potions out of the room. He looked at Lord Wilfried, who was regarding him with a teasing smile, then, after pulling an awkward face, downed the potion in one go.

After seeing the royal family and the top-ranking duchies accept potions, I was resolved to take one even if my sister tried to stop me. Jossbrenner's supply of rejuvenation potions had been largely drained after our ditter match; I saw no reason to turn down a free one.

Besides, we used our mana for Ehrenfest, did we not? This is only fair.

I gazed at my sister, silently posing the question to her, and she responded with a curt, resigned nod. When it came time for Jossbrenner to accept or refuse the potions, we both took one from Lord Hartmut. Lustlaune did the same.

Ehrenfest was currently distributing its third box of potions—they had evidently come well prepared—and what I saw inside caused me to gasp. It was positively brimming with bottles. To prepare this many potions, Lady Rozemyne and the others must have expended a lot of resources, mana, and, of course, time.

“There are just so many...” I murmured to myself. “Is Ehrenfest not at risk of exhausting its resources trying to keep up with Lady Rozemyne's limitless compassion?”

Lord Hartmut raised an eyebrow at me, turned to look at Lady Rozemyne, then gave a proud smile. “Ehrenfest is not at risk, no. Our duchy is enriched by the compassion of our saint and grows more prosperous by the day.”

Despite being Aub Ehrenfest's adopted daughter, Lady Rozemyne was filling her duchy's land with mana as a High Bishop, teaching other duchies about ceremonies so they could obtain divine protections themselves, and preparing rejuvenation potions for those who had offered up their mana. Not just anyone could say they had such achievements to their name.

Lady Rozemyne was a true saint all along.

I had always assumed that Lord Hartmut's tales about her were exaggerated, but now I knew better. As I moved to drink the potion he had given me, I reflected that I should have listened to him with more reverence.

Ah, this potion really does act faster than the ones I'm used to. I wonder how it was made...

The potions that Ehrenfest had distributed were incomparable to those we learned to make in class. I could already feel my mana coming back.

“Are these... made with ingredients from Ehrenfest's gathering spot?” I asked my sister.

“They certainly explain why Ehrenfest is not wanting for mana. A supply of these would allow them to fill their entire duchy.”

I gave a firm nod. Such potent means of recovery would make it much, much easier to replenish one's duchy *and* create more rejuvenation potions.

"However," Lustlaune interjected, "while they do recover mana, they do very little to ease exhaustion."

I moved my arm around a little. As she had said, my body was still quite weary. "Considering that you might find yourself too exhausted to move, perhaps normal rejuvenation potions are more effective."

My sister nodded. "These would be perfect for knights in the heat of battle or for a person who wishes to brew something they would otherwise lack the mana for." Her evaluation gave me a good idea of what whoever had designed the potions prioritized the most. They were presumably doing some strange research that required an immense amount of mana.

Immediately after finishing their potions, the royal family and the archduke candidates were able to move around freely... but the archnobles from lesser and middle duchies were still struggling. Having noticed this, Lady Rozemyne opened and closed her hands, then touched her neck—was she testing something?

"Your mana is recovering but not your stamina, correct?" she asked. "My mana has recovered as well, but I would not want you all to be stuck sitting on the floor, so..." She made her schtappe, then chanted, "*Streitkolben*" to create Flutrane's staff. The chalice had not produced any light to begin with, but the feystones on this staff already sparkled green.

"And now Flutrane's staff...?" came dazed murmurs. Lady Rozemyne had formed one divine instrument after another.

Lady Rozemyne shyly cast her gaze downward. "I must rely on Flutrane's staff to heal so many people at once. My inexperience is a great source of embarrassment."

That seems like the wrong thing to be embarrassed about...

A small part of me wanted to say as much, but the knowledge that Lady Rozemyne was about to bless such a large crowd as though it were nothing stifled my voice. I was convinced that nobody in Yurgenschmidt could wield the divine instruments as readily as she. Normally, one would not even consider using mana to ease another's exhaustion, nor would one bless so many people at once.

"May Heilschmerz's healing be granted," she said, and green light spread from the feystone atop her staff. Some of it formed a pillar that reached toward the ceiling—like during the previous ceremony—while the rest rained down on us all.

As I closed my eyes, feeling my exhaustion melt away as I enjoyed the warmth of Lady Rozemyne's mana, there came a whisper:

“Mestionora...” It was barely spoken at all, but with everyone else silently bathing in the light, it carried effortlessly across the room.

Mestionora? She’s a subordinate of... Wind, I believe?

I was still memorizing the names of all the gods, but I recognized Mestionora. She was the Goddess of Wisdom, from what I remembered. But as I wondered what she had to do with Lady Rozemyne, I heard an energetic voice call out, “I concur, Lady Hannelore!”

Alas, I do not understand enough to say the same...

I opened my eyes instinctively and saw Lady Clarissa of Dunkelfelger launching into an impassioned speech. “I received exactly the same impression!” she said. “Lady Rozemyne’s actions clearly parallel Mestionora, who was permitted by the gods to use all of their instruments!”

Lady Rozemyne had stopped her blessing, perhaps out of overwhelming surprise.

My knowledge of the gods extended only as far as what we were taught in our theology lessons, but still—I wasn’t familiar with the story Lady Clarissa was referring to. Most others were surely having the same thought.

“I do not seem to recall such an idea being expressed in the temple’s bible...” Lord Hartmut said, watching Lady Clarissa with doubtful eyes.

“It is spoken of within old Dunkelfelger books.”

Lady Clarissa’s assertion was quickly affirmed—not by anyone from Dunkelfelger, but by Lady Eglantine. She told us how Mestionora was the daughter of the God of Life and the Goddess of Earth, then concluded that she was “just like Lady Rozemyne.”

Perhaps that really was the case. Lady Rozemyne had enough mana to wield multiple divine instruments, and the intelligence to have been first-in-class since she started at the Royal Academy. Plus, if one were to believe Lord Wilfried, then she had also created all of Ehrenfest’s trends.

As I considered this, Lady Eglantine giggled. “I speak in jest, of course. Please do not look so troubled.”

Lady Rozemyne gave her a thoroughly troubled look. “Anyone would be troubled to be compared to a goddess, Lady Eglantine...” It was a very reasonable point, in my opinion—how was one supposed to react to such words from a member of the royal family?

Hartmut stepped forward as if to protect Lady Rozemyne, then thanked Lady Eglantine with a smile. I could only sigh in awe of how expertly he dealt with the situation. Truly, he was any archduke candidate’s ideal retainer.

I see that wonderful lords and ladies attract wonderful retainers.

Today's ceremony had proven dramatic enough to make me reconsider several things I'd thought were common sense, but all in all, I returned to my dormitory feeling very satisfied—and with my stamina and mana fully recovered.

Someone Worthy of Caution

“Prince Anastasius, Prince Sigiswald has arrived.”

I entered Anastasius’s villa, ready for our private conversation, to find that he was already kneeling before me. He had started acting like my retainer ever since his marriage to Eglantine was decided. I accepted it, as I understood that he was emphasizing his position to our retainers and the others.

“Brother,” he said, “Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has—”

“We are the only two here, Anastasius,” I noted, interrupting his greeting and making my way to the seat I was offered. “No need for all the formalities; I’m more interested in what you have to say. What did you discuss with that Ehrenfest archduke candidate, Rozemyne? You thought it best to discuss things with me before telling Father, did you not?”

Just the other day, Anastasius had attended a tea party for those affiliated with the library. There, he had privately spoken to Rozemyne of Ehrenfest, and now it seemed there was something about their exchange that he wished to tell me. Important reports were generally given over dinner in the royal palace, with Father present, but on this occasion, I’d received a personal invitation. I was on tenterhooks awaiting his next words.

“Brother, do you recall the blessing that rained down upon Eglantine during our graduation ceremony?” Anastasius asked.

“Of course. How could I forget?”

The blessing in question had caused Anastasius’s retainers to argue that he was meant to be the next king after all, my own retainers to say that Eglantine was fated to be the next king’s bride, and the Sovereign temple to proclaim that she should immediately be raised to queenhood. In short, it had caused no end of trouble.

“As it turns out,” Anastasius said, “that blessing was performed by Rozemyne.”

“Don’t tell me—was she following instructions from Ferdinand again?”

Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander, was particularly suspicious of those two; I’d never really understood it, but the man controlling Rozemyne was apparently behind all this after all. His goal had presumably been to divide the royal family right after Anastasius and Eglantine’s union while simultaneously involving the Sovereign

temple.

“She claims that the blessing simply came out while she was praying for Eglantine’s happiness and singing the song of the dedication whirl...”

“That seems... rather incomprehensible. I do not understand it.”

“Fear not, Brother; nor do I.”

That was hardly reassuring.

The more I thought about it, the more suspicious Rozemyne seemed to be. She always completed her lessons with terrifying speed and then promptly returned to Ehrenfest, so even those in her grade rarely saw her. After finishing her last class of the year, she would spend each day of her remaining time in the Academy visiting the library. She would not even participate in the awards ceremony despite having come first-in-class twice in a row. As far as I was concerned, she was an entirely unknown creature.

In her first year at the Royal Academy, Rozemyne took over royal magic tools through incomprehensible means and got involved in a fight with Dunkelfelger. Then, she gave a blessing to Eglantine during her graduation ceremony—despite not having offered one to Adolphine or to me, the future king.

During her second year, Rozemyne gave black weapons to apprentice knights without permission and used a strange shield to protect only those from her duchy in the attack on the awards ceremony. These events spurred Raublut to investigate the secrets of where Ferdinand was born, and from there, he began warning us of the threat the man posed. He said that Ferdinand was controlling Rozemyne and searching for an archive hidden within the Royal Academy’s library—one that could only be entered by those of the royal family.

“So, did you learn what Rozemyne or Ferdinand is trying to achieve?” I asked.

“No, but I asked her to serve as High Bishop for your Starbind Ceremony and grant you a blessing. She agreed, with some conditions.”

I furrowed my brow while Anastasius began listing her requirements; it was hard to believe that anyone would make demands of the royal family. It might have been more reasonable coming from a duchy that had contributed to the civil war, but from an opportunistic neutral duchy such as Ehrenfest it seemed a bit shameless.

“Does she understand Ehrenfest’s political standing, I wonder?”

In the past, we had seen little reason to pay attention to Ehrenfest; it was known as a backwater duchy with very little influence and even less cause to draw the royal family’s attention. Now, however, it had

far too much sway. I wanted its people to understand their place, be a bit more humble to the royal family, and attempt diplomacy with the duchies that actually contributed in the civil war.

“Still,” Anastasius said, “if you can secure a blessing of your own, then fewer people will criticize you.”

That certainly was true. By showing the populace that the blessing Anastasius and Eglantine had received was from a human, not the gods, I could start to reshape public opinion. The Sovereign High Bishop had been so agonizingly smug when pushing for Eglantine to become the next Zent, saying that she had received “a blessing straight from the gods themselves.” How would he react in light of these new developments? The Sovereign temple had been getting too cocky for its own good as of late, so hearing about the shame he had brought on himself during the bible investigation had worked to ease my stirring heart. Having another means to put them down would be highly beneficial for us all.

I nodded and said, “I agree that a blessing will move the discourse along. As this is your idea, I shall entrust negotiations with the Sovereign temple to you.”

“Understood. Next, there is an underground archive that requires three keys to be opened...”

Hortensia, an archnoble, being assigned to the library had apparently allowed them to open the librarians’ previously sealed rooms. Inside, they had found the keys to the underground archive.

“Are you referring to the archive that only the royal family can enter?” I asked.

“At the moment, we do not know for certain. Solange is the only remaining librarian from before the civil war, and, as a medscholar, there were many places she was not allowed to enter, and much she does not know.”

Our only choice was to go there and see for ourselves. However, with security this tight, it made sense to assume that the Grutrissheit was inside.

“Hortensia wishes to investigate the archive as soon as possible. To that end, we have selected her, Hannelore of Dunkelfelger, and Rozemyne of Ehrenfest as keyholders.”

I crossed my arms. Why grant the Ehrenfest archduke candidate a key when everyone was so suspicious of her?

“Anastasius, this does not seem to make sense,” I said. “Should the key not be given to Solange rather than Rozemyne?”

“As a mednoble, Solange would not be able to reach the archive. One must be an archnoble or higher, it seems. Would you assign two of your archnoble retainers for this?”

Hortensia had apparently asked the royal family to send those we

could trust the most, as the facility was clearly important to us. Anastasius had declined, however, as we simply did not have the manpower to spare.

“An archive that well protected must contain valuable documents,” I said. “Only certain individuals can enter. I would not mind assigning my retainers to manage the keys if all they must do is open and close the archive whenever I intend to visit.”

There was no need to involve archduke candidates with a facility important to the royal family. The archive was likely meant to be a secret; it was best kept under my control, as the next king.

“Brother, the archive does not necessarily contain the Grutrissheit.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked. “It exists for the royal family, but the former archlibrarians made it so that we could not enter.”

According to Raublut, the first to learn of this archive, the previous librarians had devised a plot before their execution to ensure that the king would not be able to enter the archive. They had apparently pulled a trick of some kind to prevent the knights from entering their rooms.

“Solange informed us that, after rising to the throne, the king continued to visit the library each year around the time of the Archduke Conference,” Anastasius explained. “Hortensia also reported that she remembers Prince Waldifrid planning to visit the library after his coronation.”

“I see. *After* his coronation...” I replied, nodding to myself. “That makes it a lot less likely that he was visiting to obtain the Grutrissheit; the coronation of the next king is intended to show the aubs that it has been passed on.”

Past members of the royal family entering the underground archive was enough to confirm its importance back then, but it was hard to tell what it offered for those of us in the present.

“Furthermore, Hortensia wants more than for the archive to be opened; the library’s magic tools have been drained of mana and are in a terrible state, and she wants the assistance of anyone who can resupply and investigate them, librarian or no. Would it not trouble you to send two of your retainers to work in the Royal Academy’s library permanently—not just temporarily to open the archive?”

Naturally, it would be difficult to send two of my retainers on such a long-term job of unknown importance; they were providing critical support to my life and work. It was also possible that their new efforts would be in vain, as we had no guarantee that the archive would lead to the Grutrissheit. To me, it seemed a task best left to the retainers of other royals.

“What if you and Hildebrand were to send one retainer each?” I

asked. “Do you have any who could stand to stay in the Royal Academy?”

“As you know, on top of my work in the palace, I am supporting Hildebrand with his duties as the Royal Academy’s overseer. I am busy enough that I cannot spare a retainer; I would ask for *more*, if possible.”

Last year, the adult royals had been too busy doing important work in the palace to oversee the Royal Academy. As a result, the young Hildebrand was assigned to the position immediately after his baptism. Up until that point, the overseer had existed purely as a figurehead, meant to remind those present who was in charge—yet there had then been the appearance of a *ternisbefallen*, the students using black weapons, the bible investigation, and the attack during the awards ceremony. It was a sequence of events too serious for Hildebrand to manage himself, which was why Father’s retainers had suggested that Anastasius take over the role this year. They argued that he could remain at the royal palace and go to the Royal Academy when an incident occurred, and that Eglantine’s new position as a professor would allow him to stay abreast of any goings-on.

Of course, Hildebrand had been quick to protest the idea, having seemed to feel that his duties were being taken away from him. His retainers had expressed similar reluctance, as they believed that replacing the young prince would make him appear incapable in some way. That was understandable, so we ultimately decided that Hildebrand would continue to serve as the overseer, but that he would contact Anastasius when matters got out of hand. It was a necessary precaution, as we all anticipated another incident between Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger.

“Hortensia is the wife of the Sovereign knight commander,” Anastasius said. “She understands that the Sovereignty does not have the leeway to send any more librarians, hence her suggestion that the two archduke candidates serve as keyholders instead, considering their work for the Library Committee. There are no other students who will give mana to the library while they are so busy with their classes.”

This so-called committee had been supplying the library’s magic tools with mana since before their discovery of the archive beneath it. The other students had witnessed this already, so nobody would bat an eye about them continuing to work with the librarians. Naturally, Hildebrand was excluded from consideration; it was fine for a prince to offer his mana whenever he deigned to visit, but the library could not summon him at its own convenience. As far as Hortensia and Solange were concerned, Rozemyne and Hannelore were the only option.

“I understand the circumstances,” I said, “but I still think we should reconsider the Ehrenfest archduke candidate. It is one thing to supply mana, but to serve as a keyholder? Have you forgotten Raublut’s warnings? Her duchy is dangerous.”

Before I could say much else, an ordonnanz flew into the room. Another soon followed, then another after that. They were from Eglantine, Hildebrand, and Hortensia, respectively. Apparently, the very girl we were discussing had just supplied some critical information. She had given a detailed explanation of who could enter the triple-locked archive and said that it contained documents the royal family would do well to read.

“*Some* archduke candidates can enter?” I asked. “What does that mean, exactly? Rozemyne clearly knows more than Solange, but why?”

“If she had known this much to begin with, then she would have said so when the keys were first discussed. She is terrible at hiding things,” Anastasius assured me. “I would assume that Ferdinand gave her this information—perhaps after she revealed that she is becoming a keyholder.”

Indeed, it would have taken about this long for her to write to and then hear back from Ferdinand, assuming that they were corresponding by letter.

“To think a backwater like Ehrenfest, a bottom-ranking duchy at the time of the civil war, would know such things...” I mused.

“Raublut is correct; we have every reason to consider Ferdinand suspicious. If their people are willing to supply us with information, however, then we have no reason to refuse them. Let us consult the aubs at once. Perhaps one of them has entered the archive before.”

If members of the country’s many archducal families were also able to enter the archive, then perhaps they would provide us with further intelligence. I decided to consult Klassenberg’s and Dunkelfelger’s aubs.

“Brother, if what Rozemyne says is true and these documents are best read by the royal family, then I think you should visit the archive with us,” Anastasius said. “I have taken the lead thus far because Rozemyne is friends with Eglantine, but if the information describes how to be king as we suspect, then it would be best that you read it.”

I could tell that my little brother wished for us to see these documents right away and clear any suspicions that Ehrenfest was planning a coup. He even seemed to feel sympathy for Ferdinand, who was under Raublut’s scrutiny. I pondered for a moment; Anastasius knew more about Ehrenfest than I, and not even Raublut’s accusations had given him much cause to doubt Rozemyne.

“My understanding is that Ferdinand was on poor terms with the

mother of the current Aub Ehrenfest and was sent to the temple as a result,” I said. “Perhaps he is offering us this information as a show of gratitude now that we have sent him to a greater duchy instead. He may have reevaluated his opinion of the royal family.”

I was trying to keep Anastasius’s feelings in mind, but on the inside, I was more suspicious of Ferdinand than ever. Raublut suspected that he was part of a royal branch family, born in a villa known as Adalgisa—that he resented having been sent to a duchy and was aiming to secure the Grutrissheit for himself. I’d checked a record of Adalgisa in the royal palace and found that the previous Aub Ehrenfest had taken a child from there to raise as his own. There was no name written, but the date had made it clear that this child was Ferdinand.

We had worried that Ferdinand might cause another civil war, but wedding him into Ahrensbach had made it impossible for him to take the throne. Raublut wanted the key to Adalgisa to investigate further, but Father had refused, telling him the matter was resolved.

Perhaps I should grant the key to Raublut and get him to investigate further.

We needed to look into Ferdinand as well, but I thought it most wise to start by meeting this Rozemyne girl. Perhaps then I would understand why Hortensia and Anastasius were so confident about her being a keyholder.

“I shall do as you suggest and meet Rozemyne myself on our way to the underground archive,” I decided. “I can make time three days from now. Oh, and do inform Hildebrand about this; the king did technically make him the Royal Academy’s overseer.”

This matter was too serious for a young child to bear, but we had given him his position to begin with; who were we to reject him for wanting to carry out his duty? Having the young Hildebrand in attendance was also sure to lower Rozemyne’s defenses, even if only a little.

Now, I wonder what they know...

My curiosity was not limited to Rozemyne herself. I was eager to see what Ferdinand knew and what he intended to tell us.

My father wanted the Grutrissheit to legitimize his kingship, and securing it would allow for easy control of the political stage. If we had any leads, then I was resolved to follow them... though the process was admittedly bothersome. If this archive did not direct us to the book, I would consider it a waste of time.

I personally had no attachment to the Grutrissheit; Yurgenschmidt had been without one for as long as I could remember, and I was confident that I could rule without its influence. Indeed, we were managing fine already. I was willing to make some sacrifices to

maintain this peace.

Yes, I understood that there could be nothing better than obtaining the Grutrissheit—but we did not have it, and the royal family needed to rule Yurgenschmidt either way. I was the son of a king without the Grutrissheit, and I needed to prove that we could survive even without its aid.

That was my duty as the next king.

Headache-Inducing Reports (Third Year)

“Aub Ehrenfest. Here is a list of attendants charged with light crimes that warrant fines and nothing more.”

“Put it over there.”

Thanks to the warning and intelligence we had received from Matthias, a student of the former Veronica faction, we had managed to imprison the nobles who had given their names to Georgine. Actually detaining them had proven a real mess according to Bonifatius, who had taken charge of the affair—some had set their estates on fire the moment they saw the Knight’s Order arrive, while others had blown their own heads to pieces to keep their memories from being read.

“I don’t know what they were planning, but it didn’t seem like they were having tea parties or celebrating the start of winter,” Bonifatius said. “All ten or so of them were desperate to hide whatever evidence they could. You know... I think Matthias’s report really saved our hides here.”

Initially, we had intended to wait until after the Lord of Winter hunt to start our purge. Bonifatius maintained that this would have been much too late. Most of our targets had taken their own lives, leaving behind almost no evidence to speak of, but we had imprisoned plenty of criminals outside of Gerlach’s winter estate. Now there was so much cleanup to be done, but we barely had the manpower.

“Karstedt, how will we fare hunting the Lord of Winter?” I asked.

Carrying out the purge first had cost us a lot of rejuvenation potions and offensive magic tools, and decreased the number of knights we had at our disposal. In other words, we would need to attempt the hunt in a severely weakened state.

“The feystones from Rozemyne and mandatory contributions from the imprisoned scholars should make it just barely possible,” he replied, his face dark with exhaustion. He had tirelessly devised a plan to make our hunt a success on top of cleaning up the aftermath of the purge.

It seemed that sending Rozemyne a load of empty feystones after she had mentioned being overwhelmed with mana had paid off tremendously. On top of that, we had ordered some of the scholars charged with lesser crimes to create the offensive magic tools we

would need for the hunt. They would repay their fines through labor and mana contributions.

“The high-quality ingredients from the Royal Academy helped too,” Karstedt continued. “It’s going to be close, but it looks like we’ll manage the hunt once again this year.”

“That’s a relief. How about the temple’s Dedication Ritual? Have you heard anything from Cornelius or the other guard knights participating in the training?”

The temple’s religious ceremonies had a very direct impact on the next year’s harvest. We had previously left them to Rozemyne and Ferdinand, but neither of them was here this time. To make things more complicated, the remaining blue priests didn’t have much mana to begin with, and there were fewer of them than ever. The purge having been performed before the Dedication Ritual also meant that the pre-baptism kids had already been sent to live in the temple orphanage.

“I’m told that Hartmut is being fairly proactive, since Rozemyne entrusted everything to him in her absence. Cornelius was grumbling about having been wrapped up in it all.”

According to Karstedt, Rozemyne’s guard knights were being made to imitate blue priests. Ceremonial robes had already been prepared for them.

“When he came to the training grounds, Damuel told me they’re banging their heads against the wall that is teaching Angelica the prayer for the Dedication Ritual,” he continued. “Still, we want them to succeed as soon as possible; Angelica and Cornelius will provide key firepower against the Lord of Winter.”

Ferdinand and Eckhart’s departure meant that Rozemyne’s guard knights were now crucial to the fight. Striking a balance between the ceremonies and the hunt was going to be important.

“Aub Ehrenfest, may I have a moment?” asked Leberecht, one of Florencia’s scholars, as he entered the room with several boards in hand. His red hair, which was similar in color to Karstedt’s and tied firmly behind his head, must have been a Leisegang trademark. His dark-brown eyes were always calm and collected; I couldn’t remember seeing him get emotional even once.

I looked up from my desk. “Ah, Leberecht. Have you all finished going through the reports from the Royal Academy?” Preparing for the purge and everything after it had made me so busy this year that I’d delegated responding to the reports to Florencia. Leberecht was probably here to confirm that they were done, as per usual.

“No, Lady Florencia fainted while reading them,” he replied. “Can I ask you to handle this batch, Aub Ehrenfest?”

“What?! Is she okay?!” I demanded, standing up on instinct after

hearing his dry announcement. This wasn't the time to be reading reports from the Royal Academy; I was way more concerned about Florencia's health.

In stark contrast to my surge of emotion, Leberecht indicated that I should sit back down without even twitching his eyebrow. "Lady Florencia has stepped away from her work and returned to her room," he said. "A doctor is currently seeing to her, but the diagnosis will not come just yet. I should also note that going to see Lady Florencia will not do anything to improve her condition; her health is best left to the doctor and her attendants, so I would ask that you instead resume your seat and complete her workload for today."

"Ngh..."

"As her scholar, I am likewise unable to do much for her while she is ill. May I ask permission to assist you as you go through the reports?"

The purge had cost me some of the people who usually worked in my office, so having Leberecht's help was greatly appreciated. I started distributing work to Florencia's scholars.

"And now—here," Leberecht said. "The reports from the Royal Academy."

"From what I remember of yesterday's report, Rozemyne went on a rampage after getting annoyed during some tea parties and decided to hold a Dedication Ritual in the Royal Academy. She received a summons from the royal family and intended to request permission to use their shrine. Gah... I've yet to even read these, but I can already feel my head aching."

I wanted nothing more than to bin these reports and save myself the anguish, but they surely described Rozemyne's meeting with the royal family. Leaving them unread wasn't an option, so I accepted them from Leberecht.

"My hope is that the royal family refused to let her use the shrine and that was that, but given what happened with Florencia, I'm guessing they gave her permission."

"Indeed. The situation has taken an unexpected turn."

Having no other choice, I started reading the reports. The first was fairly normal: Dunkelfelger's students had trained enough that they could now obtain blessings on their own, and, at their request, a strict delineation was being made between the joint researchers and their helpers.

"They're letting us use the shrine hall so long as we bring the ceremonial tools we need from Ehrenfest. Once the temple's Dedication Ritual is over, please send Wilfried's, Charlotte's, and my ceremonial robes, alongside the other things we'll need, including offerings and the like. If you ask Hartmut, he should take care of everything right away. From

Rozemyne.”

I reread the report a few times and then muttered, “You know, this isn’t too bad.”

His interest now piqued, Karstedt gave the board a look as well. “It’ll take us a while to send over everything she’s asking for, but the royal family are letting them use the hall, and apparently for free. Pretty forgivable.”

“Yep. This is much better than we expected—neither the royal family nor the Sovereign temple is causing any problems. I don’t even feel the urge to grab my head and slam it against the table, which is rare after reading one of these reports.”

But as we started to relax, Leberecht flipped over the board and said, “Hubris is a slow and insidious killer, Aub Ehrenfest.” There was text on the back as well.

“PS: I’ve invited the royal family to join us for the Dedication Ritual. Their presence should help to keep the participants in line, plus I want the royal family to experience a real religious ceremony. Their jobs should get a little easier if they can earn some more divine protections. Prince Anastasius said that he would consider it.”

Wait, wait, wait! Didn’t we explicitly tell her not to get involved with royalty?!

I put a desperate hand on my forehead; I’d spoken too soon. We’d anticipated that the royal family might add a problematic condition to using the shrine, but not that Rozemyne would willingly involve herself with them.

“And she did it out of goodwill...?” I muttered.

“She does say that ‘their jobs should get a little easier,’” Leberecht replied. “She must have acted out of pure kindness while thinking it was actually beneficial for everyone, much like how she saved the children of criminals partially with the future of our duchy in mind.”

I groaned a little. His analysis was harsh, if you thought about it, but he wasn’t wrong. I’d accepted Rozemyne’s proposal to save the children for the sake of Ehrenfest’s future, considering how our population had taken a hit after the purge, but the Leisegangs found that hard to swallow—after all, the former Veronica faction had put them through so much misery and for so long.

“Lady Rozemyne seems to believe these agreements are mutually beneficial,” Leberecht went on, “but does she not pay any mind to the impact they have on everyone else? This may help us and those of the royal family, but what will the children of other duchies think?”

“To be honest, what happens to the royal family is no concern of Ehrenfest’s. All they ever do is push us in unwanted directions.”

I remembered Ferdinand saying that whenever Rozemyne became involved with someone, she couldn’t help but invest herself in their

well-being. Evidently, she was now close enough to the royal family for this to apply. She was in too deep.

“Well, what is there to do...?” I pondered.

“As the royal family is now involved in this joint research, we cannot cancel it on our own. We should summon Hartmut for the time being. Only he will be able to confirm whether we can send the necessary implements for the Dedication Ritual to the Royal Academy, and how long it will be before that can be done.”

I nodded and then sent Hartmut a summons. Once the ordonnanz disappeared from sight, I started reading the reports from the other kids.

“Professor Gundolf scolded us, saying that we Ehrenfest students have no new, interesting ideas. He is indirectly telling us to involve Lady Rozemyne. From Marianne.”

“I made several suggestions, but Drewanchel improved on them and came up with better things. It feels like the results of our research are being taken away from us. From Ignaz.”

Rozemyne’s reports were all about the joint research Ehrenfest was doing with Dunkelfelger, whereas those from Wilfried’s and Charlotte’s apprentice scholars only discussed our joint research with Drewanchel. It was easy to guess where each person’s interests lay.

“Seems like the joint research with Drewanchel isn’t going so well,” I said.

“There is no helping that, as research requires a variety of skills not measured through written classes: imagination, speed in producing results, a keen eye for what information to conceal and what to give others, and so on. Our apprentice scholars may have finally begun to earn worthwhile grades in their written lessons, but this is still a heavy weight for them to carry.”

Leberecht had dismissed their shortcomings as inevitable, but Karstedt gave a more sympathetic look and crossed his arms. “If the burden’s too much for them, don’t they need advice more than anyone?” he asked. “Drewanchel wanted to collaborate with Rozemyne specifically from the very beginning. How about the scholars ask her for some good ideas? She’s bound to have some.”

“I’m not so sure,” I replied. “They may need advice, but we want that gremlin involved with as little as possible; otherwise, she’ll cause problems in Drewanchel as well as Dunkelfelger. Have the scholars think on their own for a bit. This is an opportunity for them to get some important experience.”

I could tell from the scholars’ reports that they didn’t want to rely on Rozemyne—that they wanted to advance this research themselves. They were eager to make these accomplishments their own precisely because this duty had been placed in their hands.

“Oh? Do you not mind if our duchy’s joint research with Drewanchel fails?” Leberecht asked.

“This is a matter between students, and Rozemyne said we couldn’t have refused Drewanchel even if we’d wanted to. No matter how poorly things might go on our end, Ehrenfest will be none the worse for it. This is a valuable opportunity for them to learn from their mistakes. Trial and error, people.”

After a moment spent in thought, Leberecht said, “Then that shall be our reply.” I decided to leave the writing to him, and it was then that I noticed a letter among the boards.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“A letter to Hartmut from his Dunkelfelger fiancée. It arrived with the reports. I thought it best that you read through it, considering that it has come from another duchy.”

During more normal circumstances, personal letters would be sent directly to their intended recipient, but the purge and such had spurred us to read all messages coming in from the Royal Academy. Personally, I felt a little bad about reading someone’s private correspondence, but it was my duty as the archduke. Even though I doubted that Hartmut’s fiancée was in bed with Ahrensbach, I needed to know for sure.

“Aaaaah! Never in all my life have I been more grateful for this serendipitous meeting ordained by Ewigeliebe’s harsh judgment! Her hair, blessed by the God of Darkness to be as alluring as the night sky, danced through the air with power overflowing. Her golden eyes sparkled with the Goddess of Light’s blessing as she stared down her foe. Our lady, whose mortal form has received the direct favor of the supreme gods, raised but a single hand, and in it appeared the greatest masterpiece that Vulcanift the God of Smithing ever produced, crackling with blue lightning. Her heroic figure radiated the light of all the summer gods, and into mine eyes was burned the true passion of Angriff the God of War. Or, no, wait—it was not just Angriff.”

You’re the one who should be waiting. What the heck even is this?

At first, I’d assumed that Hartmut’s fiancée was using the traditional flowery template that was often followed when writing to one’s partner-to-be... but that wasn’t true at all. Despite it reading entirely like a love story, her letter did nothing but shower Rozemyne with praise; she didn’t even attempt to compliment Hartmut himself. I tried to skim the rest, but even that became unbearable.

“Uh, Leberecht? Are you sure this is from Hartmut’s fiancée?”

“There is no mistaking it. Clarissa is detailed as the sender.”

As it turned out, Leberecht hadn’t read the letter; he’d checked the recipient and sender and nothing more. Was I the only one who felt the striking contrast between his coldness and Clarissa’s gushing?

“What kind of person is Clarissa?” I asked. “Is she, er... dangerous?”

“I met her during last year’s Interduchy Tournament. She is an archscholar from Dunkelfelger who wants nothing more than to marry into Ehrenfest and serve Lady Rozemyne. Her union to Hartmut is good for the future of our duchy. I must admit, I did not expect my son to become romantically involved in the Royal Academy, considering how cold he can be, but that is another matter.”

I merely blinked in response; Hartmut had never come across as cold to me. As far as I was concerned, he was a loyal retainer of Rozemyne’s whose extraordinary passion seeped through each of his reports.

“Excuse me, Aub Ehrenfest,” came Hartmut’s voice as we continued to examine the letter. “I am here as requested.” He had made his way here immediately after receiving the ordonnanz—and through the blizzard on his highbeast, if the lingering flecks of snow in his hair were anything to go by.

“Sorry to call you over during these busy times,” I said. “Rozemyne wants to know how the orphanage is holding up. I assume that, like the Lord of Winter hunt, a lot of your plans have been disrupted.”

The kids sent to the orphanage had been raised as nobles, and, children or not, they were presumably showing a lot of resistance. It wasn’t hard to imagine the youngest of them crying for their parents.

Hartmut smiled. “You may rest easy. Under my watch, no problems will occur in the orphanage. As we speak, everyone there is living in peace, without exception.”

“Alright. That’s good to know. Pre-baptism kids can’t be counted as nobles, but the more that survive this, the better.” It felt as though the entire duchy had been thrown into chaos, so I was relieved to hear that at least *somewhere* was peaceful—even if that somewhere was under Hartmut’s strict watch.

“Hartmut, here’s why I summoned you,” I said, handing over one of the boards. “This is from Rozemyne. She wants you to prepare for religious ceremonies.” I then gave him the letter. “And this is from your fiancée Clarissa.”

Hartmut began reading the board without a moment’s hesitation. His bright orange eyes grew wider and wider, and his hands started to tremble as he muttered, “This can’t be. Lady Rozemyne is performing the Dedication Ritual in the Royal Academy...? I cannot believe it. Why, oh *why* did I have to graduate last year?! To think I am unable to watch her ceremony with my own eyes... I am a failure of a retainer!”

That reminded me—the last report Hartmut had seen was from

three days ago. So much had changed since then, it was no surprise that he was so taken aback.

“I would only say that if you’re unable to complete the preparations in time,” I said. “More importantly, when is the temple’s ritual due to finish? We need to send Rozemyne a reply. Think you’ll be able to give her what she needs?”

“Lady Rozemyne wills it, so I shall ensure that the temple’s Dedication Ritual finishes promptly. All of the required tools will be prepared, and I will deliver them to the Royal Academy myself.”

He was as skilled as ever—or at least as fanatic about Rozemyne. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Leberecht wearing a look of exasperation.

“Contain yourself, Hartmut,” he said. “Lady Rozemyne has not summoned you; she has asked only for the necessary tools and robes. This intense attitude of yours ill befits a retainer serving the archducal family. Pray tell, where do you think you are? Stand down and cool your head.”

He then turned to me with a sour expression and continued, “My apologies. He is the youngest of my sons, so I was too lenient while raising him.”

“I think his obsessive loyalty is more to blame. You seem surprised, but Hartmut always acts like this when Rozemyne is involved. Did you not know?”

“My wife informed me that a lot has changed over the past few years, but I did not realize he had become this foolish. There is nothing wrong with being invested in one’s lord or lady, but it pains me to see him lose control.” He sighed once, then returned to his usual flat expression. From that point on, he took great pains not to look at his son.

Meanwhile, Hartmut only had eyes for the correspondence I’d given him. He looked between the board and Clarissa’s letter, thinking something over pretty seriously. The father and son who made no effort to look at one another caused the air in my office to become kind of sharp.

“Hartmut, that’s everything I needed you for. We’ll inform Rozemyne that you’ll get her what she needs for the Dedication Ritual,” I said, sending him away. Then I turned to Leberecht. “This is my reply to Rozemyne. You take over the rest. I’ll go check on Florencia.”

“Understood.”

Hartmut really was scarily good. He finished the temple’s Dedication Ritual in no time at all, then started coming to my office on a daily basis. During each visit, he gave a detailed report on how

much of the required tools and such had been brought to the castle, while also advising Wilfried's and Charlotte's retainers about the ceremonial ornaments to be worn during the ritual.

But all that was just an excuse.

"Last year, when Ehrenfest was ordered to bring its bible for inspection, Lord Ferdinand went to the Royal Academy personally as High Priest to manage the temple's belongings. With so many temple goods now being requested for the Dedication Ritual, is it not clear that another such manager will be needed? As the High Priest, that is my duty."

Hartmut was an adult, meaning I would need to get the royal family's permission for him to visit the Royal Academy. I'd been refusing him, trying to save myself the trouble, but it was hard to argue when he was using Ferdinand as a precedent.

"The cultural perspective on religious ceremonies has been on the verge of shifting since Lady Rozemyne obtained so many divine protections in her practical lessons," he continued. "The pillar of light that formed when she mimicked Dunkelfelger's ritual with Leidenschaft's spear is similarly informing the masses of the importance of divine instruments and rituals. If we are to produce the instruments once again, then we must have the proper authorities overseeing them. I intend to accept all of this responsibility as the High Priest."

Hartmut's nonstop offensive was really wearing me down. I was impressed that Rozemyne was still able to tolerate the guy; she definitely had more patience than me.

"Not to mention, there is much that reports alone do not convey," Hartmut continued. "Should we not be using every opportunity to visit the Royal Academy and gather intelligence ourselves? By bringing the necessary tools and participating in the Dedication Ritual as High Priest, I will even have an opportunity to speak with the royal family."

I guess the royal family letting Hartmut into the Royal Academy can only benefit us.

It wouldn't cause me any problems, at least—and any time he spent in the Royal Academy was time not spent being a pain in my neck. Still, I was so very tired of putting up with his daily appeals that I shooed him away, saying that I would ask the royal family for their permission. Everything else was up to them.

"The royal family has permitted Hartmut to enter the Royal Academy, but they have several conditions," Leberecht announced, the relevant board in hand. But that was the least important part of his message.

"Hold on!" I cried. "Did you say a moment ago that *the king* is

participating in the Dedication Ritual?! Why?! I thought it was just Prince Anastasius!” Yes, Rozemyne had said that it was best for the royal family to experience rituals, but who would have expected this? Nobody!

Give me a break...

“It certainly is unprecedented for the Zent to participate in the joint research of students.”

“I wish I could forget ever having read this. Is there not some way we can cancel the project entirely...?”

“This is all a surprise, to be sure, but now we have even less of an out,” Leberecht replied as dryly as ever. At a time like this, Karstedt would normally be sharing in my torment... but without him here, there was nowhere for my emotions to go.

“Gah... I never thought I’d envy Karstedt having to go hunt the Lord of Winter.”

I wished that I was in his place, far away from these reports. Being in the heat of battle was sure to be less of a headache than dealing with all this.

“The Zent is joining the ritual,” I grumbled. “*The Zent*. Something is going to happen there, without a doubt.”

“Indeed...”

Not being able to touch the Royal Academy was maddening. Why were adult royals getting so involved when adults weren’t supposed to interfere? And what had been the point of ordering Rozemyne not to engage with the royal family...?

No matter how much I thought about it, there was nothing Ehrenfest could do. Our only option was to see Hartmut off and beg him to keep anything bad from happening.

“An update on the Dedication Ritual has arrived, Aub Ehrenfest. This one is from Hartmut. He wishes to report to you personally and has thus requested some of your time tomorrow.”

I’d heard that Hartmut had returned right before sixth bell and intended to spend the rest of the day getting everything back to the temple. That was his responsibility, so I didn’t mind having to wait a while longer for his account of events. The fact that he hadn’t come to me right away likely meant that nothing serious had occurred, so I picked up his report for today without feeling too worried.

About eighty percent of the report described Rozemyne’s divinity as she performed the ritual, and how her holiness had been proven to many duchies at once. Ten percent was a list of which duchies had been blocked by Schutzaria’s shield and the dangers they posed. The rest described how the royal family had thanked us, as well as Hartmut’s own frustrations about being unable to accompany

Rozemyne to the library.

“Leberecht... are there any other reports?” I asked. “This one mentions Schutzaria’s shield being set up in front of the Royal Academy’s shrine, but I don’t see an explanation as to why.”

He handed me a new board, which I then looked over. It was from Ignaz, one of Wilfried’s apprentice scholars.

“The Dedication Ritual was a success. Rozemyne made it so that neither the Sovereign Knight’s Order nor the archduke candidates’ guard knights were permitted to attend, but we were able to ease everyone’s concerns using Schutzaria’s shield. From Ignaz.”

They used Schutzaria’s shield to get rid of the Sovereign Knight’s Order and the apprentice knights?!

The report implied that everything was fine, since everyone had understood their reasoning in the end, but I wasn’t so convinced. I could feel an unpleasant pang in my stomach as I picked up a report from Charlotte.

“Rozemyne made two divine instruments from her schtappe. I saw it with my own eyes and still struggle to believe it. Uncle can do it as well, apparently. Is this normal...? I feel as though my sister is misunderstanding something. Also, light shoots up into the sky whenever religious ceremonies are performed in the Royal Academy. It happens for Dunkelfelger as well. If these ceremonies become more commonplace, then perhaps Rozemyne’s abnormality will not stand out as much. From Charlotte.”

WHAT IS HAPPENING OVER THERE?!

Not even Hartmut’s report had mentioned Rozemyne using two divine instruments at once. Maybe only Charlotte had noticed—or maybe it really was normal to Rozemyne’s cohort. I couldn’t determine the truth on my own, so I turned to the next report. It was from one of Charlotte’s apprentice scholars.

“The Zent expressed his gratitude to us; now, we can say with all certainty that every duchy has its eyes on our research with Dunkelfelger. I will do my best to ensure that our work with Drewanchel is not seen as lesser by comparison. If you can provide an update on our research with Ahrensbach then please do; we have been unable to find out much about it. From Marianne.”

It wasn’t hard to see that Marianne’s competitive spirit was ablaze. She knew that their work with Drewanchel couldn’t compare to the research being done with Dunkelfelger, so she wanted to know how things were going with Ahrensbach. Unfortunately, I didn’t really know myself.

“As much as I’d like to help her, that research is about making magic tools more efficient,” I said. “All I know is that the Ahrensbach apprentice scholar is taking care of the schematics while Rozemyne is doing the actual brewing.”

The research was more of a personal matter between Raimund and Rozemyne than a duchy-wide collaboration, so we didn't get many reports about it. The schematics and prototypes would be presented during the Interduchy Tournament. It was possible that Ferdinand had seen them already.

"Is it truly okay for you to be so in the dark about this joint research, Aub Ehrenfest?"

"I'm not leading it; Ferdinand is. And with him keeping an eye on things, there shouldn't be any problems to speak of."

I thought back to my half-brother, who was always agonizing over how to contain Rozemyne. I could guess that he, too, was sitting with his head in his hands right now. It was actually pretty nice to think that he was suffering alongside us—that we could share this connection even when we were so far apart.

"I will say as much to Marianne," Leberecht said, then handed me another board. "Now, here is a report from Lady Rozemyne."

"We got to use the mana left over from the Dedication Ritual to help the Royal Academy library. The magic tool that might as well be its foundation was just about to run out of mana, so we got there just in time. I made sure to fill it well, so the library should be safe for some time now. From Rozemyne."

My face clouded over. Karstedt had since returned from hunting the Lord of Winter, so I said without even looking up from the board, "Tell me, Karstedt... is this supposed to be a report on the Dedication Ritual...?"

Karstedt read the board over my shoulder and then said with a frown, "She mentions the leftover mana, so... yes, I'd assume so." As always, Rozemyne was off in a world of her own. Her report about the Dedication Ritual was almost entirely devoted to the library for some reason.

"Surely there are more important things for you to write about, Rozemyne!"

"I support your position, Aub Ehrenfest," Leberecht interjected, "but a collective analysis of the reports we have received confirms that the ritual ended safely without any rebukes from the royal family. We can expect no major incidents in the lead-up to the Interduchy Tournament."

Karstedt and I glanced at one another; he shrugged and shook his head, to which I nodded. The Dedication Ritual might have ended without incident, sure...

But, well...

I sighed, then gave Leberecht a look of complete seriousness. "If you truly believe that, Leberecht, then you don't yet understand Rozemyne. Of course she's going to cause more major incidents before

the Interduchy Tournament.”

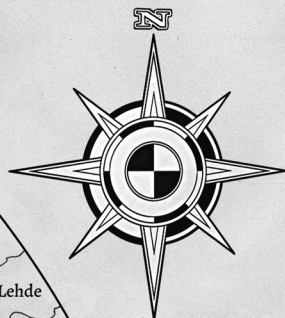
I was sure of that much—but I could never have guessed that someone would challenge Rozemyne to a game of ditter, hoping to secure her hand in marriage when she was already engaged. As the old adage went, for as long as Rozemyne was in the Academy, headache-inducing reports were inevitable.



(Formerly) Zausengas Border Gate
Under Klassenberg Management

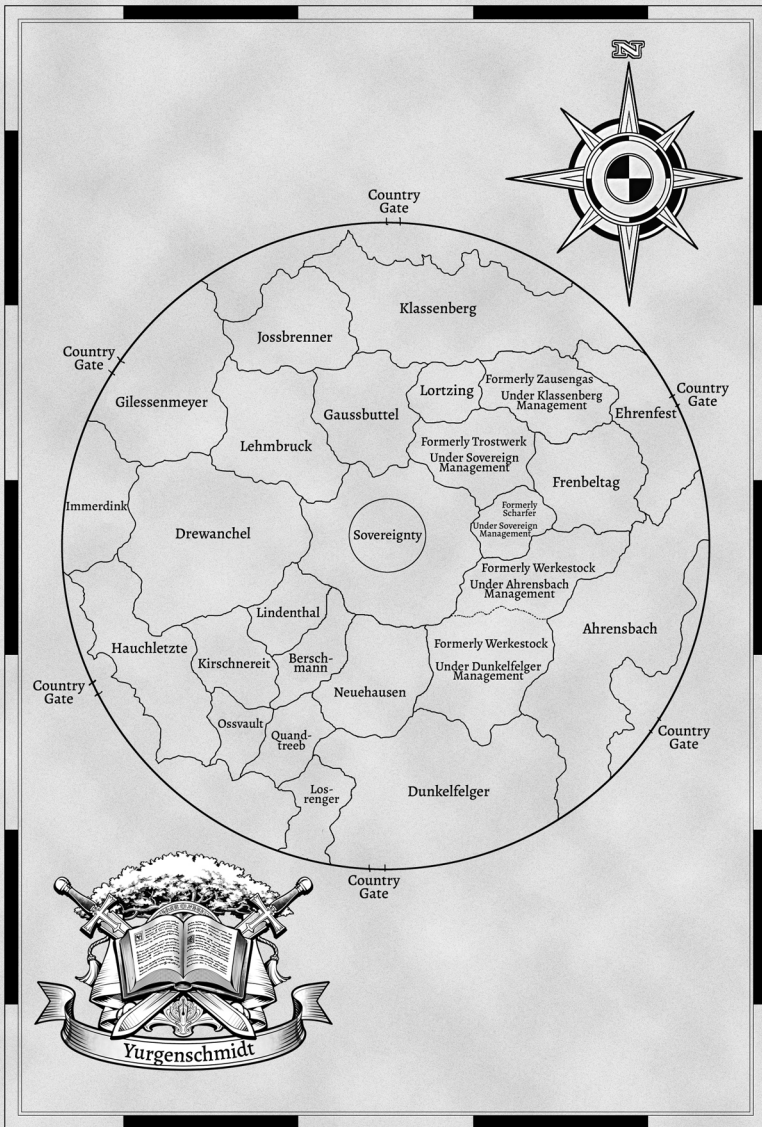
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Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Volume 2*.

This volume's prologue was told from the perspective of Ferdinand, as so many of you requested. It focused on how he's doing in Ahrensbach and on how the letters he receives from Rozemyne are dealt with. Please understand, though—he's only able to do normal work because Detlinde is still at the Royal Academy.

The main body of the volume begins with a summons from the royal family before rolling into a trip to the library's underground archive, a look at Dunkelfelger's religious ceremonies, annoying tea parties, and a Dedication Ritual in the Royal Academy. Things then take a turn when Lestilaut taunts Ehrenfest into a game of bride-taking ditter, which is subsequently interrupted by the Sovereign Knight's Order.

Truth be told, when I was first crafting the plot for this volume, there was a lot more time dedicated to making magic tools with Raimund in Hirschur's laboratory. The ditter game kept taking up more and more space, though!

Rozemyne doesn't have nearly enough common sense to understand why involving the king in a joint research project between students is so unusual, so, in the web novel, the Dedication Ritual was described through the eyes of Lueuradi. Here in the light novel, however, that was turned into an independent side story at the end. I hope you enjoyed seeing how an archnoble from another duchy felt about meeting the royal family and experiencing her first religious ceremony.

This volume's epilogue was written from Hannelore's perspective. It included a resolution to the bride-taking ditter match, a conversation with Anastasius, which took place after Rozemyne left, and a glimpse into how those from Dunkelfelger view Rozemyne's actions. Naturally, these are all things that we wouldn't have seen through Rozemyne's eyes.

The first newly written short story was from the perspective of Sigiswald, the first prince, while the second was narrated by Sylvester.

The first short story offers a glimpse into the first prince's relationship with Anastasius, and the way the Sovereignty views Rozemyne and the rapid growth of her duchy. As for how these things

might change over time... please look forward to future volumes.

Sylvester's story is another entry in the fairly popular series of chapters about headache-inducing reports from the Royal Academy. At last, Rozemyne's antics have become so shocking that Florencia faints, and a new chapter begins with Sylvester taking over.

Leberecht, Florencia's scholar and Hartmut's father, is currently filling the hole left by Ferdinand. As an archnoble, he could not show his suffering in front of the archduke, but here we have another father struggling with his rampaging child—a child who, in this case, is fighting like a madman for any opportunity to visit the Royal Academy. (Hahaha.)

Three characters received designs from Shiina-sama for this volume: Sigiswald, Trauerqual, and Lueuradi. I asked for Sigiswald to look like a proper prince who nonetheless resembles Anastasius, Trauerqual to have hair of a similar length to Ferdinand's and come across as someone so exhausted that he's practically living off of potions, and Lueuradi to exude the air of a floaty, dream-loving young girl who makes for a killer duo with Muriella. The results were absolutely excellent.

At the time of my writing this, the anime adaptation of Part 2 has begun. It's only recently started, but seeing Fran, Gil, and Delia as they were at the start was super nostalgic. I can't wait to see Wilma and Rosina too.

This volume's cover art shows the archduke candidates of two duchies in the midst of playing bride-taking ditter. Rozemyne is wielding Leidenschaft's spear, while Lestilaut has Dunkelfelger's secret treasure. There's also Wilfried in full plate armor, and Hannelore looking distressed. It really makes you feel tense, doesn't it?

I asked for the color illustration to show the underground archive, a very important place for Yurgenschmidt. Since the keys are normally managed by adults, I thought it best that the keyholes be hard for Rozemyne to reach.

Shiina-sama, thank you as always.

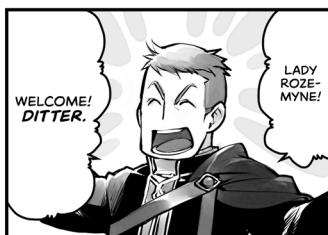
And finally, my utmost thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 5 Volume 3.

April 2020, Miya Kazuki

THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME
BONUSES!

A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY

Art by You Shiina

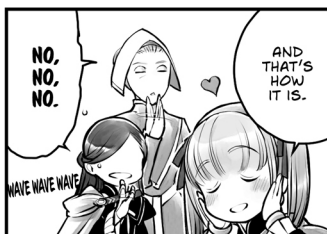
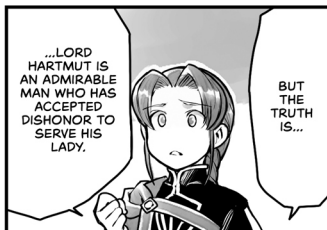


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LOVERS



A MAIDEN'S HEART(?)









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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Volume 2
by Miya Kazuki

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